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# PLANET STORIES



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Parade of the wordy legions.

T. T. SCOTT, President

JACK O'SULLIVAN, Editor

MALCOLM REISS, Mgr. Editor

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## THE VIZIGRAPH

WE'RE in trouble again. Bad trouble. Letters are skidding in at space-warp speed censoring the daylight out of PLANET for running three Bryan Berry stories at one time. It is hard to see why we should get especial hell for this. Here comes a writer who is well-set in England though new here—here were three gems of high nutritional value—here was a magazine with a staggering I.Q.'d audience—a natural, yes?

But the screams that cut deepest were not from the people who shrieked: idiots! dopsies! crack-pooofs! Lord no. After all we've been called worse in voices with teeth on the end of them. Nor did we mind those who merely asked us if we were script-weary and were going in for a wholesale operation. What really hurt were the snide accusations from people behind false names and peculiar faces claiming we'd served those three Berrys in one dish because he was really a relative and we were splitting the \$30,000 two ways up the middle.

Let us assure you that the price paid was not \$30,000. Nor are we related to Bryan Berry Esquire except in a large, mankindly way. Of course we have an old college pal called Boysen, and there's that connection with Miss Huckle Berry who is kessin' kin from a collateral branch of the Berrys, but the only close connection we have had in recent years is with the Razz Berrys, and we have certainly been seeing a lot of them.

Let us say here and now before rent-controls go off that a few people did like our refreshing 3-1 treatment in January PLANET. Just because the Satevepost don't do it, just because Cosmo don't do it, nor Galaxy don't do it—that's no reason you can't do it, said they. And let us say here and last—we still think that PLANET readers, who invariably know something good when they see it, will go for Bryan Berry. He is a writer of quality, a writer of ideas, and his people are real people. We would all be poor judges not to recognize a new bright light in the SF field when it blinds us. If we have the chance we shall again give you a 3 to 1 cocktail of Berry's work.

Please permit us to make one slight correction relative to a statement in the November VIZIGRAPH. Letters do NOT have to be typewritten to make these columns. We realize that many of our readers do not have access to type machines. We are nevertheless eager to hear from them and have their thoughts appear here.

The following three gents have an illustration coming to them if they make known their choice to the Ed: (1) Ron Anger; (2) Jerry Taylor; (3) Dave Hammond.

### WRATH AND WISDOM

Salisbury Mills,  
New York

Dear, Dear Editor:

There's one thing I am forced to credit you with—you make life interesting by offering, through the pages of PLANET STORIES



magazine a diet of yarns that are sometimes very good, and then again, sometimes very horribly poor.

A good example of this sort of up-again-down-again change-of-pace has been presented in the November and January issues, God bless you and curse you.

After perusing the November batch I was ready to throw in the sponge—with one exception—Conan Troy's *THE CONJURER OF VENUS*. That was first-class intrigue all the way down the line, and it held my interest to the last sentence. It should have been your lead story, pal. [Ed's note: *It was, friend. It was. Started on page 4 and ended on page 18. Couldn't start it sooner unless you want VIZI junked, and your letter too.*] But the others! Oh, those others! Where, on this sorry planet, did you ever dig them up? Even Leigh Brackett's once-brilliant name could not add lustre to SHANNACH—THE LAST, a sorry space opera if ever there was one.

AS IT WAS by Paul Payne should have been left in the moth balls, and the same could be said for all the others with possible exception of *THE LUMINOUS BLONDE*. This was about as STFish as a dead herring, but in all honesty I must admit that I enjoyed the piece.

Well, to make a sad story bright, I resolutely swore off *PLANET*. One good yarn; one fair one; and five lemons, is a far-cry from what I consider a satisfying magazine. But lo and behold, along comes the January number brought into my household by my young brother who only recently has been captivated by BEM-fever.

Now here was a publication of a different color, believe it or not. Not only was the cover far superior to its predecessor, but the stories (excepting Jake's awful dosage) were first-rate. I was particularly addicted to your new find, Bryan Berry, in whose writings I found a great similarity to those of the eminent Raymond Bradbury. There's a simplicity and homeyness about them, and yet a fine thread of suspense runs through each. *THE FINAL VENUSIAN* rates my best-bet selection.

May I commend you also on Mr. Russell's superior piece of writing in *DESIGN FOR GREAT-DAY*. Lawson, his main character, was cute, bright and immensely intelligent. His sage remarks brightened every page of the story . . . and throughout it all one continually maintained the feeling of being out in space with the hero.

Needless to say, I'm back in the *PLANET* fold once again. I'll never leave you again. It may be a bumpy course, I admit, but just being able to look forward to another ish like the last one will keep me firmly in line.

Loyally yours,  
JANET HATHAWAY

## HI & LO OF IT

Dear Editor:

I was very pleasantly surprised to find an Eric Frank Russell story in your January issue. That's a real achievement.

I was unpleasantly surprised to find the three stories by Bryan Berry (whoever HE is). As stories they were just plain hacky of stories. Nothing new or never-seen-before in any of the three.

Now, I don't mind you using low quality stories like these, but for crying out loud, *don't* call the author "PLANET'S great new find." You raise a lot of people's hopes that way and they're awfully disappointed when the stories flop. And then—some people will approach *THREE* stories in *ONE* issue of a magazine with a cynical attitude: "This guy

had better be *darned* good."

Anyway, I liked the Eric Frank Russell novel, got a big kick out of the readers' pages, found your interior illustrations excellent, and like the general impression the rest of the stuff left on me. Keep it up, editor, and I'll bet that Mrs. Mary Corby, Jerry Taylor, and Mavis Hartman (in that order) would like to get a free original.

When can we expect some more Brackett?

DAVE HAMMOND

Ed's note: There's more Brackett cooking.

## BERRY FESTIVAL

13 Water Street,  
Fairbanks, Alaska

Hi Ed:

If a guy speakin' from out of the States can get into your pages of pro and con, I'd like to make a few terse remarks . . . it's too cold up thisaway to get very verbose.

I have a peculiar feeling that you are going to receive a lot of mail on this Bryan Berry deal you handed out in the January issue of your magazine. I think a lot of folks are going to resent being told that here is a "great new find." Nevertheless and notwithstanding, I *LIKED* all of them. While Berry may not be exactly a great find, he paints an interesting word-picture; and while the suspense is meager, there is enough to rate the stories above the satisfactory level.

Hope you shall be fortunate enough to get more from Berry soon.

Hopefully yours,  
TOM NORDINE

## BROTHER, NEPHEW OR WIFE'S COUSIN

Albany Road  
Thomasville,  
Georgia

Dear Editor:

Where do you get off, ballyhooing Bryan Berry like that? Is he your brother, your nephew, or a cousin on your wife's side? I have read some corny writers in my day but this Berry-man would produce a thousand bushels to the acre if his corn was genuine.

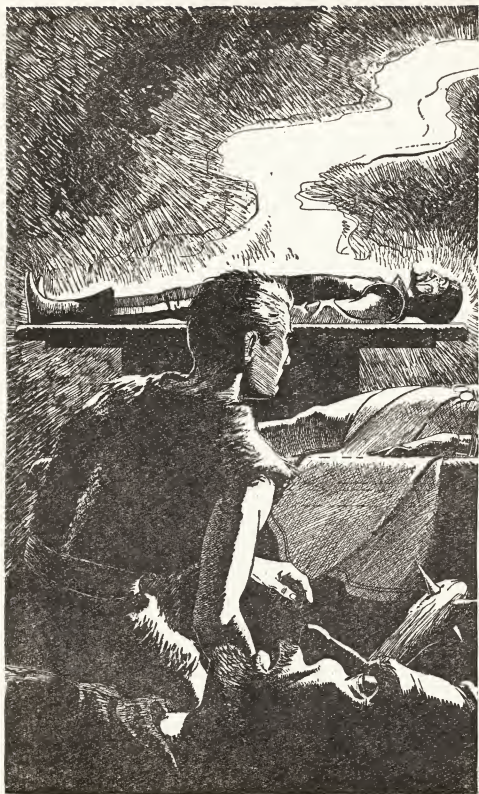
I suppose you think I'm just a quarrelsome Southerner but I'm not. The reason I'm complaining is that I don't think Bryan Berry is a "new find" in any man's magazine. New maybe, but no find. For one thing his stories are as old as the hills; take *THE IMAGINATIVE MAN*. If I have read that yarn once I have read it twenty times, the only difference being the kind of characters on the planet. And I didn't like his characters as much as I like the regular run of STF writers' characters. Whoever heard of Pan and centaurs on Venus? You should have called the story *THE UN-IMAGINATIVE MAN*.

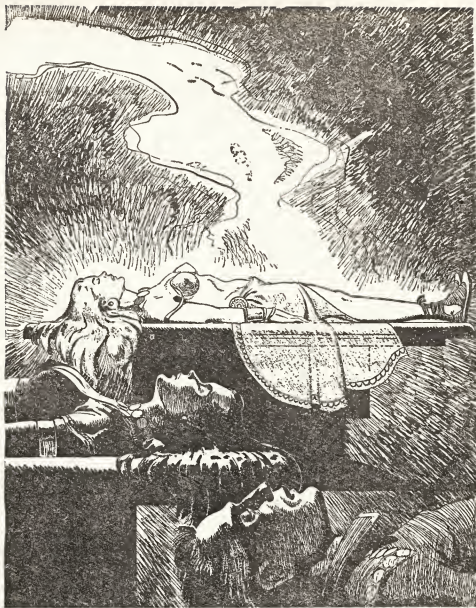
As for *GROUNDLING*—trifling. Just plain trifling. A man wants to be a spaceman. He has a nagging wife. So he kills her so he can become a spaceman. And then he can't pass the space tests. Trifling I repeat.

Maybe he had the bud of an idea in *THE FINAL VENUSIAN*. The only thing is, he made his robots too real. They weren't robots, they were human beings, but they had to be robots or there wouldn't be any point.

(Continued on page 109)







# The Warlock of Sharrador

By GARDNER F. FOX

*For unremembered eons the Thing had slept. For a million years it had quested through the star worlds of its dreams, until it lived only as a faint legend in the race memories of mankind. But now the time had come for man to recall its name, and to worship it once again. Noorly-thin arose and went out into the world of men and robots.*

THE McCANAHAN came awake in the pearl mists of a Senn dawn, staring upward into the round blue muzzle of a Thorn blaster. The handgun hung in the air without visible support, its trigger moving slowly back. In an instant, it would lash out at him with a thousand tares of destruction.

He whipped the bedclothes into a geyser of silk and moonylon, and dove naked over the edge of the bed to roll on the floor and turn over and over. He brought up against the chair where his uniform belt hung, and fumbled blindly for his service holster.

The blaster spoke in a soft whoosh of yellow flame, and the bedclothes puffed once, billowing into a thick, reddish smoke. *That would have been me, instead of the blankets, if the Little People had not come in my dreams to whisper in my ears of Flaith's loveliness,* the McCanahan thought, and tore loose his addy gun.

His wrist steadied, and he touched the stud. The blaster, hung on a tensor beam, went red, then white, and began to melt in droplets all over the thick Morrvan carpet of his officer's quarters. The tensor beam, held by a minute mechanism inbuilt within the handgun's butt, let loose, and the blistered, melting thing thudded to the floor.

"It was a close thing," Kael McCanahan told himself, sitting there naked on the floor.

It had been the sfarri who had sent the gun. The sfarri, who hated the men of Terra with a hate like a fierce, blazing flame, who would not scruple at assassination to gain their aims.

They were a cold, efficient breed of men, these sfarri. The farflung Galactic fleet ships of Mother Terra, stretched in a thin line between the stars, had crossed addy beams and searirays with their slim vessels a thousand times. Almost always, Terra lost her ships. Almost always, those far-ranging sfarran ships smashed the eagle-blazoned Terran cruisers, and fled like laughing ghosts into the black infinity of space.

No Terran ship had ever captured a living sfarran. Somehow, with the barbaric philosophy of hara-kari, they committed suicide. It never failed.

And slowly, but remorselessly, the ships of Terra and the Solar Combine were

pushed back and back, away from the Rim planets and the close vastness of the Sack worlds that were so rich in every mineral, jewel and foodstuff known to man, and even in some that Terran man had never known.

The Solar Command had ordered Kael's father, Sire Patric McCanahan, Fleet Admiral, with Captain Raoul Edmunds and Commodore Kael McCanahan, to Senorech, there to make at last parlay with the High Mor who ruled the Senn. They were to offer alliances and trade agreements.

Too many times, at the foot of the great ruboid throne of the Senn ruler, had young Kael McCanahan seen the thin, hard lips of the High Mor twist cruelly as he lashed out at the gray-haired Admiral. Too many times had the red flush of fury crept up past his tight white uniform collar with its crimson Commodore braid encrusted thick on its rich surface, as he listened to the High Mor explaining to his father the fact that the men of the Solar Command were no match for the relentless fury of the sfarri.

The High Mor, it was plain, was eager to ally himself with the sfarri.

In return, the sfarri would rid him of these annoying Terrans.

THE Thorn blaster that lay melting on the thick pile of his officers quarters was the opening shot in the extermination program.

The McCanahan let the breath from his lungs in a sudden relief. He sat with his back propped against the leg of the chair, and the hand that held his own Thorn shook so that he put his wrist on his naked knee. He was a tall man, a man grown hard and fit with the mechanical fitness that was the hallmark of all officers of the Solar Intergalactic Command. Blond hair was cropped close to the conformations of his head, giving his face a hard, carved look.

The mark of deep space was in Kael McCanahan's eyes, and in the catlike walk and movements of his big body. He had been processed as only Spacefleet officers were processed, in these days of the Empire, with a cold precision to his mind and a careful hardness to his body.

He came off the floor and began to dress,



sliding into the white uniform with its crimson facings, pushing feet into highly polished jet boots. His mind went to his father, the Sire Patric McCanahan, who was Earth representative at the court of the High Mor, overlord of Senorech.

"If they've made their try for me, they've already made it for him," he told the room.

He buttoned his white jacket that had the golden eagles at collar and cuffs. He whipped the leather service belt around his middle. He fastened the black blaster holster to its pivot.

The door opened to a fingerpress, and he was out in the long, metaloid hall, moving with long strides. A woman came out of the shadows to meet him, running.

"Kael! Kael—wait!"

It was Cassy Garson, in her white nursing uniform that was always a little too tight for her curved body. Like many other Earth officers on the distant planets of the empire, the McCanahan had found memories of the Nursing Auxiliary of the Fleet. Cassy Garson had been a lot of fun, on a dance floor or under the curved canopy of a canalboat, or on the silken cushions of a reflexifloor.

Her soft hands caught his, and he could feel her body's tremblings as she came against him. "Kael, you've heard! Oh, Kael, I'm scared! What'll they do to us?"

"Talk sense, Cassy!" he snapped, knowing his nerves frayed and jumpy because of the metal thing he had melted in his room. He softened his voice, and told her of it.

Her dark eyes were frightened things. "They killed your father tonight! The same way, probably. A Thorn blaster was found a foot from his gloved hand. It looks like suicide. The High Mor has sent word that we're to leave. All of us. No more Earthers on Senorech!"

Cassy whispered in the stillness of the corridor, "We've orders to be aboard the Eclipse by noon. To chart our course for Antares. To get out of the Rim planets and stay out."

The McCanahan drew a deep breath. His tight collar choked him, and a vein swelled and throbbed in his hard face. "He's afraid of the sfarri. Sfar is close to the High Mor's home galaxy. May the gods curse a man so driven by fear he'd murder a man who

wished him nothing but good!"

Cassy shook against him. "Kael, let's rouse the others! We've got to be on the Eclipse by noon!"

THERE was nothing he could do now, nothing except swallow the bitter truth that he was running from a fight, that he was leaving his dead father on an alien planet with not even a shamrock to blow in the breeze above his grave. His father, one of the Bloody McCanahans, who had scratched their names on graves from Mars to Makron, who had been born to the service of the golden eagles, and now lay with no man to whisper a prayer over his dead body.

McCanahan shook himself like a cat stretching after a sleep. The anger boiled within him, locked inside his guts by his tight lips. "I'm going to get his body, Cassy. I'll take it back with us for decent burial."

Her hands tightened until the red nails cut into his flesh. "You're a fool, Kael McCanahan! A stubborn fool that's walking to his death! Don't you understand? That's just what the High Mor wants you to do! He'll have his dragon killers waiting for you, like cats standing at a mouse-hole in the kitchen flooring!"

"Let them wait," he growled, but her hand dragged him along the corridor, to door after door of the fleet barracks. They roused the honor guard, eighty men in all, the most allowed on Senorech by the High Mor. Men tumbled from their bunks with sleep glazing their eyes, but they wakened fast enough, with Cassy and the McCanahan to whip them into action.

They found Captain Edmunds of the Eclipse half dressed. A small, chunky man, he showed the years of his service in the crowsfeet at the corners of his eyes and the faint silver that threaded his curly black hair.

"I'm sorry, Kael. You're The McCanahan now, but that doesn't mean a thing, not after what's happened. Get aboard the ship. I'll bring the men, and whatever they want to take along."

Cassy said, "I've alerted the nurses. They'll be ready at blast-off time."

Within an hour, it was done. Sober men in white uniforms were filing out

of their quarters by twos and threes, with their warbags slung over shoulders or hanging by leather thongs from their wrists. They moved across the city in a body, nurses in their center, their hands wrapped on the walnut butts of their service blasters.

McCanahan lost himself five minutes before Captain Edmunds took them out of barracks, toward the silver bullet that was the S. I. C. Eclipse. He stepped from Cassy Garson's side, into an intersecting corridor, and moved down a flight of steps to the basement. It was easy, down here among the great heating tubes and dynamos, to stand and wait until the bootfalls faded. Cassy came once to a ramp, and called, but her voice echoed hollowly in the cellar unanswered.

Twenty minutes after they were gone across the city, McCanahan was sliding through the shadows cast by the monolithic buildings, and moving along the broad avenue flanking the Jaddarak canal. Ahead of him were the white bulks of the government buildings. Somewhere in those towering multi-windowed edifices, his father lay dead, with a Thorn blaster close to his hand.

He reached the high stone wall of the gardens and was hoisting himself over the red and stone walltop when a dark-faced Senn caught sight of his Earther uniform and screeched the alarm. The McCanahan cursed in his throat and dropped to the ground inside the garden, his jet boots printing their soles deep in the soft loam of a bed of Thallan sunflowers.

He made for the arched doorway at the near end of the gardens. At a run he came into the darkness of the groined arches. He knew his way through these labyrinthine tunnels. With his father, he liked to walk in the cool corridors where the manacled talkaprots screeched their birdlike songs and the colored waters of the fountains made a rainbow of moving brilliance.

The hoarse, brazen pitch of the bry-horns were startling in the Senorech morning. *They'll be roaming these halls with their blasters cutting at every shadow,* he thought. *Sooner or later one of the shadows they shoot at will be mine!* He had to reach his father's suite, had to kneel there and do what must be done for Patric McCanahan,

as Patric had done to his own father before him.

They might expect him to come as he was, expect him to fight his way to his father's side and kneel to whisper a prayer for him over his dead body. On Earth it would be expected. Expected and guarded against. But Senorech was not Earth, and on Senorech things were rarely done for emotional reasons. The McCanahan yanked his Thorn from its sheath as he slid into a telepetor and twirled a dial. If they were expecting him he was ready.

Curiously, the suite of rooms was empty, save for the crumpled man who lay in a white uniform with gold and platinum aigrettes on the shoulders, and red tykkan braid looped under a crumpled arm. McCanahan went to his knees, and his lips moved. In the custom of spacemen everywhere, from the domed tunnels of the Moon to the hellcraters of humid Brinth, he put his hand to his father's wrist and whispered, "I swear by the blood that bonds us, you will not have died in vain. I will make the report, and investigate the reason for your dying."

It was a simple thing, that oath. Many men had spoken it, until it had become a part of the creed of those who roamed the star world. It prevented tragedies, and saved lives, for once the reason for a man's death was known, preventive precautions were taken, so that many men who otherwise would have died, lived to walk the palm terraces of Mars and sail the tossing seas of Acheron. The histories of space featured and explained it, and glamorized its usefulness.

But as the McCanahan let the words trail from his lips, he cursed and looked down at his palm, where part of his father's wrist had come off, to stick to it.

He grimaced, and then reason came into his head. His father was recently dead, no rotting corpse. "Plastiskin," he breathed, and leaned down, ripping with strong fingers at that wrist, carefully built up to hide something.

Around his father's wrist was wrapped a length of silvery wire, thin and fine. The McCanahan leaned forward and untwisted it.

It came away and danced in his fingers,

reflecting the blue glow of the wall mercuri-lamps.

"A harpstring!"

He sat on his ankles and forgot that a mile away the *Eclipse* was warming its take-off tubes. "Now why in the name of Brian Born did father hide such a thing on his wrist? He played no harp, nor anything else that ever made music!"

**B**UT this was no time to solve puzzles. With a snap of his fingers, he rolled up the silvery wire and bound it tight about an ankle, then thrust his foot back into his service boot. He went to the window and stared down at the splashing fountains and the sunflower gardens half a mile below him. The walls were lined with Senn guards, inside and out, and men with the High Mor's red dragon insignia on their cloaks moved here and there in the shrubbery, slashing at ferns and jungle vines with their swords.

"They'll tire of that soon enough," he decided. "Then they'll come through the palace itself, a floor at a time, working the place over with the point of a dagger and the muzzle of a Thorn."

They would be expecting him to hide. They would be expecting him to keep retreating ahead of them until they trapped him high above, in a cloud-room or on a rooftop. A Senn or a sfarran would act like that. They would do the smart, the sensible thing.

"Faith, my belly tells me it's the smart thing for myself as well," the McCanahan muttered. "But my head tells me something else again."

He wandered the rooms of the palace until he found the wallgrille of an atmosphere tube. With the edge of his service knife, he worked at the screws until the plate came loose from the wall. He crawled into the tube and replaced the grate as best he could. Then, sliding and levering himself from curve to curve of the tube, he began moving downwards.

When he came to gentle loops in the tubes, he let go and slid. It took him three hours to get down, but when he came into the cold metal coils that could duplicate the atmosphere of fifty planets, he was below the search level, and as good as a free man

walking the streets.

"Except for the uniform," he told himself, glancing down ruefully at the white and gold resplendence of his fleet garb.

In ten minutes he was crawling up through a street grille, and heading for the space docks.

He was moving up the Avenue of Emblems, with the gleaming bullet that was the *S. I. C. Eclipse* towering above the buildings, nosing its point skyward, still half a mile ahead of him, when he heard the announcers. The words were just sounds, at first, like the pennons flapping above his head from the tall poles, each a gift of the United Worlds.

His mind was torn cleanly with a thin, hard grief, for he was remembering his father, and the way of his smiling and his gentle voice, and the fun they had shared together on the Klisskahaenay Rapids in a boat, or in the crisp darkness of space, with the stars beckoning and his father pointing them out to him. And his handclasp when he left for the Academy, his letters, his visits at holidays when the needs of the Empire were relaxed enough to free the Admiral from his cruiser. It was a good companionship, that of his father and himself, born of their mutual need when his mother died on Aldebaran.

And now it was over. No more would he see that smile or listen to that voice or wonder how it was that his father knew so much more than he about so many things. They would never hook a lyskansafish or blast a Martian boar with needleguns. They would never find new foods in restaurants that—

"—under penalty of the red dragon! Repeating! Space Commodore McCanahan—Kael McCanahan, Earther—is to die on sight. All guards are hereby warned. McCanahan must not leave Akkalan. He is to be shot on sight, under penalty of the red dragon! Repeating . . ."

It sank in after a while. He drew back into the shadows, and the harpstring tied to his ankle pained him, as if it whispered with his father's voice. *They're afraid of me and what I can do to them*, his mind told him. *They don't even dare let me get close to a spacommunicator panel!* But why? Why? The McCanahan shook his head and

looked down at himself, neat and trim in the gold and white space uniform.

*"It's a card with my name on it asking that they shoot me,"* he told the shadows. *"I've got to be rid of it or swallow a dozen blaster-beams."*

They would be searching the space docks just about now, minutes before takeoff time. They would almost dismantle the ship to find him. And there would be others, blasters in their hands, stretched all around the field. They would shoot on sight, to kill, or they would suffer the fate of the red dragon; and no one in his right mind cared even to think about that punishment, that took a man a month of agony to die.

McCanahan stripped naked in the shadows and bundled his uniform into a ball and weighed it with his boots. He made a compact bundle and threw it up, through the lengthening shadows, onto a low, sloping roof. Let them find that when they could! Then he turned and ran on the sun-warmed bricks, away from the field, toward the dirty alleyways that were the Akkalan slums.

"Now where in the name of the family leprechaun could a man who is stripped to his buff hope to find a shelter in this unholy town?" he asked the wind as he ran.

McCanahan thought of Ars Massen, a little dark man with a colossal thirst for the pale yellow fire that was Senn wine. His lips twitched as his memory ran on the nights they had spent together in the lowland taverns, sampling every liquid that the skills and arts of men could brew. Ars Massen traded in lyss furs, and spent his profits faster than the fierce little desert tycats could breed and run to his traps.

With Ars Maasen he would find Flaith.

## II

THE cities of the Senorech had been built half a million years ago when their primates first modelled clay from mud and water. As the years piled knowledge on their shoulders, their buildings grew and expanded, but they still showed the heterogeneous planning the first Senn had put into them. A man could lose himself in the slum quarter, where the dragon police rarely came, for the High Mor was content to close his eyes to the manner of a man's

profit, providing he paid a good tax at the end of the year. Under the creaking signs and iron grille balconies, in the dark street shadows, even a naked man could run free and unmolesed.

He came to a square of light and an open door under a carven tycat. Carefully he crept closer listening to the song a hundred throats were bellowing through the smoke and the wine fumes. He came inside on soundless feet and stood sheltered by a solid oak railing.

Flaith was a breath in a man's throat and a catch at his guts, lovely in bronze moire, her amber shoulders bared to the curve of her breasts, the moire slashed teasingly down a naked side to the swell of a white hip. She leaned on the wooden tabletop, and her slant eyes were clear, and her crimson hair a flame caught in the blaze of a wall torch.

The McCanahan let his eyes linger on her loveliness, but it was the little dark man, with the scar across half his face and a fuid foaming tankard at his mouth, that he had come to see.

He drew back his arm and threw the pebble he held.

Ars Maasen felt the sting of the rock on his forehead. He lowered his mug and swore by a dozen gods at the ill manners of men who would toss rocks in the middle of such a song. And then he felt Flaith's white fingers, and the dig of her long red nails in his forearm.

"It's Kael!" she whispered. "He's naked and alone!"

"For shame! A fine boy like that and—"

"Hsst, you byblow fool!" she warned.

"Go to him and see what he needs!"

She pressed the key to her dressing room into his hand, and when he had slipped through the men and women toward the door, she stood so the others could see her. On tiny golden feet she climbed from chair to tabletop, and her bare arms were amber serpents writhing in the crimson halfflight.

"The Snakes of Slaamsheel," she called to the players, and a roar of delight went up, for this was an old ballad, and the flame-like Flaith dancing with skirt to mid-thighs across the tabletops, set the blood bubbling in a man's veins.

The McCanahan caught the fire of her

throaty singing just as Ars Maasen whipped the cloak off his shoulders and flung it about his chest.

"A full belly, is it?" the dark little man asked. "Wine or Puban ale or maybe both?"

"I'm sober as the snakes Flaith sings of, and as mean!"

Ars Maasen caught the madness in his voice, and grunted, "Come quickly, then. This way, across the sill and through the alley to her doorway!"

When they were moving into the shadows of the alley, Kael told him of his father's death, and of the orders of the High Mor that made him lower than a Tuuran-peddler. And as the words came through his teeth, the raw fury that twisted him showed in his eyes. "They blasted him without a chance for a fight—the way they tried to blast me! Now they're hunting me for a reason only the Shee fairies could know!"

"Easy, boy. Easy! Talk as you want—it helps ease the pain under your navel. But don't let the hate shake you so. It blinds a man."

The little trader turned the key in the lock and the stout wooden door opened inward to a tiny room where an oil lamp cast a dim yellow glare on a dressing table and stool. Costumes hung from a peg-rack on the wall above a tycat-skin couch.

"Flaith's room," he muttered. "Only she comes here."

The McCanahan sat on the couch, and with elbows on knees he looked at the floor and began to swear. He cursed in low Martian, and in fluent English, in high Centauran and sibilant Antaranese. "May the foul fiends of Mars' ten hells gnaw his belly! May theimps of Iseen claw his eyes from now 'til Doomsday! If only Hobgob himself were alive, and here to fly away over Careeng with his mean little soul!"

ARS MAASEN chuckled, and Kael McCanahan bit down on his tongue and glared hard at him. The little man moved to the dressing table and lifted a golden carafe. He went to pour the fiery liquid it held, then turned to glance at the McCanahan. He shook his head and went across the room and gave him the carafe.

"There are times when a man can't quench a thirst, no matter how much he

drinks. Take it all."

Kael tilted the carafe and let the smokey quistl slide into his mouth. After a long while he tossed the carafe aside, and drew air into his lungs. He came to his feet and walked up and down.

"I'll need clothes. Some sort of disguise. I can talk their language well enough. I'll make out until the heat ebbs away and I can come back for him. The High Mor! A god and a priest to a god to these heathen Senn! But he's a man, and man can die, slowly and in great pain, when he's hated!"

Ars shook his head. "Go away, yes. But forget this vengeance for a long time. Maybe forever. You'll live longer that way."

Kael put out his hand and lifted the dark man off the floor and shook him. "He murdered my father! Burned him while he slept, with a Thorn blaster on a tensor beam! No way to strike back! No chance to fight for the life he loved!"

He put the little man down and patted his arm. Ars rubbed his chest where his jerkin had pinched his flesh. "You're a strong man, Kael McCanahan. But not strong enough to buck the High Mor on Senorech! I tell you—"

The door came open and Flaith slid in, away from the reek of winery air and the sound of roaring voices. She closed and locked the door and set her back to it.

She was a woman to stir the pulse of a man, in her bronze gown with its slits and deep neck, and the tight fit of its cloth to the swell of her haunches. Her slant eyes with the long curving lashes, the red fullness of a moist mouth and the smooth forehead low under the flaming hair had made her the darling of the quarter. She looked at Kael with her anger bright in her green eyes, and her lips thinned to a tense line.

"Before you speak, Flaith," said Ars Maasen suddenly, "let me tell you he isn't drunk, except with hate for the men that killed his father."

When Ars was done with the story she was in front of Kael whispering softly, "Kael, forgive me! A woman can be a fool! I was one just now, with the thoughts I had of you."

"It doesn't matter. Nothing matters any more except the man I'm going to kill some day! They won't let me leave on the *Eclipse*.



They're going to keep me here and hunt me down. And I don't know why!"

Flaith whirled and went to her dressing table. She fumbled at a jar, lifting the lid and dipping her fingers into jet cream. She said, "I'll change the look of your face, Kael honey. Wipe away its hardness and its pain. And somewhere here in all these clothes will be something to fit you. Ars, look among them!"

For an hour the McCanahan sat while they worked on him, and when the hour was done, he stared at himself in the mirror and swore by the eye of Balor himself that no man on all Senorech would know him.

"You're as big and as strong," Ars grinned, studying him. "But you look like a traveling singer, with those short curls and the shadows under your eyes. A man who sings to a woman and loves her, and runs with the dawn!"

Kael snorted, but Flaith nodded.

"A singer or a player of music. Can you use those fingers to coax a tune from anything but a pretty girl?"

Kael laughed. "And what would a man whose family came from Galway be playing? I remember a night I sang of love to a woman on a balcony over the canals of Shar Lir before I put the harp aside and coaxed music from her flesh."

Flaith flushed and scowled, then bubbled laughter.

"You used a harp, that night, you faithless rheenog! A harp that I bought and put aside with my tears, like a moonstruck schoolgirl!"

She fumbled in a chest and drew it out. The lamplight caught its thirty strings and made them glitter. Her fingers stroked it, and her eyes were tender as she lifted them to his face.

Flaith shrugged her shoulders. "I'm crazy. I'm moonstruck and as mad as the ghouls that haunt the rim of Braloom! But—I'm going with you!"

And when Kael would have argued, she put her fingers across his lips and shoved him toward the door.

"Wait outside! Neither you nor Ars nor any man we meet will know Flaith for the shameless little gypsy she's going to turn into! Do you think I want those fingers

coaxing music from that harp for anybody but me?"

### III

THE old rock road from Akkalan to the cities of the Inland Seas is long and broken. Deserts spin their sandy webs across the shards of its ancient cobblestones. Gaunt black ruins of forgotten cities can be glimpsed dimly in the fading sunset, at the foot of the Samarinthine Hills, or standing atop the stone slabs that mark the caravan routes from Pint to Kanadar. Few used the old stone road, and the few who did travel it were so wrapped in their own cares—for this was a road much frequented by criminals and their like—they had no thought for the man and woman who sat by the edge of a running stream, twenty feet from the crumbled side of the highway.

Kael's long fingers swept the taut strings of the silver harp, and a burst of clear sound came flowing forth in a wild, free call. And then the sound was softening, deepening, and in it was something of the peat bogs of Iar Connacht, and something of the chill wind that sweeps the Finnihy from Kenmare to Killarney. A soul wept bitterly in the strings' twanging, with the tears of Deirdre staining its cheeks, and the terrors of Strongbow's son clutching its middle.

"Ai, to be like Ossian, with the power to move men to laughter or to tears with the playing of his fingers on the strings," he whispered to Flaith, where she lay with her chin pillowed on a white fist, staring at him. "But a man does what he can with what he must, and I'm not one for blaming the tool in my hand. It's a good harp."

"It was made by Brith Tsinan," Flaith told him dryly.

The McCanahan opened his eyes at that, and held the harp so as to admire its fluted curve and ornate column. He touched the strings again and they wept at the deftness of his touch. He moved them again and made them laugh.

Flaith wriggled her naked toes to the lilting rhythms he drew from the strings. Across the star lanes and the paths of distant planets, men and women had carried these tunes, and though they lay as dust in their

graves, something of their memories sat in Kael McCanahan's fingers this day.

He made the harp sing of Tara and the great hall of Cormac MacAirt, of the baying hounds that ran in the hunts at Clonmell, and the cursing stones of Monasteraden.

The girl rolled on her back in the grass, and the worn cloth of her blouse grew taut across her breasts. "Teach me words to put to those songs, Kael McCanahan," she whispered, "and we'll eat well from the coppers and silver bits we take in the marts like Clonn Fell and Mishordeen."

"Words? Songs? I don't know anything about those. Make up your own words while I play to your ears and the sunlight, and the joy of being alive!"

And at the thought of life, he thought of death, and remembered his father lying on the floor with a Thorn blaster close at hand, and remembered Captain Edmunds and Cassy Garson and the rest who had lifted from Senn in the *S. I. C. Eclipse*, and what had happened to them after that!

He stood suddenly. The scowl was black across his face as he lifted the harp. He threw it from him roughly. Its strings screamed angrily as it skidded across the ground.

"I sit here and play music, and my father calls to me in whatever grave they gave him! I ought to be thinking of finding the High Mor and choking the life from his throat with these hands!"

Flaith put her long fingers to her red hair and shook it free to the breeze. Her slant eyes brooded at him as she remembered that day—weeks back—when they had stood outside the walks of Akkalan watching the destruction of the *Eclipse* under the cruiser beams of the High Mor's space fleet.

Kael had watched, sick and twisted. "That rotten mother's son ordered her smashed! He couldn't find me, so he played it safe and killed them all!"

He went mad for a little while, and Flaith clung to him with sharp nails digging into his arm and back, screaming in his ear. Only when she buried her teeth in his neck and tasted blood did he come back to sanity.

Now, remembering all that, and knowing how the death of his father and the

destruction of the *Eclipse* ate in his middle with a sort of sharp, acid bitterness, Flaith watched the McCanahan lift the harp from where he had flung it. A silvern string was curled up, snapped by the rocks across which it had skidded.

"Now, how can we replace that?" Kael wondered. And then his fingers were slipping off his boot and lifting loose the harp-string he had taken from his dead father's wrist.

"It isn't a d-note," he told Flaith, "but it will have to do. I'll not touch it oftener than I must."

He attached the string, and tested it with sweeping fingers. He growled, "Only Os-sian himself would know the difference."

The McCanahan brooded less and less in the days that followed, and as they moved along the road that bent in a wide arc about Drekkora and beyond the snowtopped hills of Sharn, he slipped back into the Kael McCanahan she had known in the taverns. Laughter came back to his lips, and he turned more and more to the harp, coaxing magic from its strings, that seemed to soothe his spirit.

As he played, Flaith hummed with him, and words came to her lips, words that matched the wild, clear music, and she sang these words to the ancient melodies, and at last they came to Clonn Fell.

THE stalls that lined the Square of the Balang were hung with priceless tapestries from the looms of Beinoll and Drith-draga, and were bright with the potteries of Lamanneen. Men and women of city house and desert tent brushed through the stalls, fingering the wares, haggling over prices, dipping into leather purses for stored coins. Many there were whose fingers waved to the sounds that came from the big fountain in the square where a tall man sat and played a silver harp.

No man would have known the McCanahan in this brown stranger with the naked chest gleaming through the rents of his worn, dusty jerkin, with his loose cloth trousers fastened at naked ankles with metallic cording. And no man would have known Flaith in the dark-skinned gypsy wanton, with her midriff bare above her flapping skirt of transparent teal and below

the woven halter that bound her breasts. She was a gamin who laughed and swayed her hips as she sang, and her eyes flashed and flirted with the slack-jawed farmers in from fields and furrows.

A sudden jostling took the farmers and the merchants as they listened to the harp-strings. They made way sullenly for the file of sfarran warriors who came shouldering a path arrogantly through the press. They were tall, handsome men, their lean faces swart and dark. They looked like fighting men, trim in black and gilt field uniforms. Their black eyes moved everywhere, missing nothing.

Now the sfarran detail was closer to the marble fountain where Kael sat with Flaith huddled close against him. He could feel the shiver run through her bare arm where it pressed his side.

She whispered, "They look for us," and her dark eyes surveyed him, studying his disguise. He could read the approval in them.

The sfarri glanced at them and passed on.

A man cursed softly from the shadows. There was a wild flurry of capes and sand-dalled feet. A peddler, with a scraggly gray beard flowing across his chest, ran like a frightened rat from a group of Kash cattlemen and into a thick thong of rug merchants from Stig.

"A rykinthus peddler," whispered Flaith.

Kael felt the fury rise in him. The sfarri governed the people of this planet as they might a herd of cattle. There was no emotion in the chase. It was hunt and man down, capture him! Take him to the sfarri tribunal, where an atomic disintor ray would blast him into thick white powder.

The peddler ran past Kael on shaking legs.

In his darkest eyes Kael read the angry terror that lay deep within him. Teeth gritted, Kael moved clumsily, bumping into the foremost of the sfarri pursuers, throwing him off balance. Two others ran into him and fell heavily to the cobblestones of the square.

The sfarran officer rose, tight-lipped at this clumsiness. His hand went to the holster of his addy-gun. Kael rammed a fist to his middle and slid sideways, his harp still in his hand. With a backward lash of his arm

he drove the harp's heavy crown into his temple.

The blow knocked the harp from his hand. He scrambled after it, where it lay on the cobblestones. His fingers missed as he snatched at it and swept across the strings. At the harsh, discordant sound that rose into the air the sfarran officer who had been reaching for him fell awkwardly to the stones, sprawling lifelessly.

Other sfarri were falling too, as if the breath of life had been blown from them. They lay here and there beside the fountain, like dead men.

Kael stared dumbly, hearing the shouts of the people of Clonn Fell falling back from the lifeless sfarri.

Then he whirled and slipped in among the crowding merchants and farmers, pretending that he was driven by stark terror.

A moment of wild, flurried movement, and he was free, darting behind a wooden wagon toward the heavy drapes of a carpet stall. Flaith was shrinking back, also losing herself in the milling mob.

Kael saw her, dove toward her.

She cried out, "What was it? How'd you do it? What killed them?"

"I don't know! We have no time to play guessing games!"

He caught her hand, dragged her into an alleyway where the massive stone walls of ancient buildings towered high above them. The dark shadows they cast lay like shielding hands that shrouded them in sudden darkness.

Flaith panted, "You touched your harp! It made a sound! That must have done it!"

"I know all that! But for the sake of your unborn children, stop talking and run!"

THEY went swiftly through the narrow streets, burdened only by the silver harp. Under a stone archway, Kael swung to the right. A small figure stood in the doorway, beckoning to them. It was the bearded peddler Kael had saved from the sfarri.

"This way," the peddler called. "Lunol forgets no man who saves him from death!"

An oak door opened. From it, a stone stair led down into a pit of Stygian blackness. The peddler put a hand on Kael's belt, dragging him down into the gloom.

They went swiftly, toward a stream of water that rushed and gurgled darkly between two narrow paths of brick that jutted outward from the sheer rock walls.

"The sewer system of Clonn Fell! Quickly, along the ledge! Gods be with us! If the sfarri follow and clap their hands on us they'll throw us to their torturers!"

The peddler whimpered in his fear as he scurried along the narrow brick ledge. Kael and Flaith ran after him. Soon their sandals were wet with the accumulated filth and slime of centuries. They moved swiftly, with the dim light of tiny bulbs, high in the domed ceiling, guiding their feet.

They went for miles through the sewer, deep down under the streets of Clonn Fell.

When they emerged into bright sunlight, they stood on a wide beach where the gray, cold waters of the Teganian Sea rolled restlessly.

Flaith sank on a rock, one hand pushing back her thick red hair. Kael read her weariness in her haggard face.

"Why were the sfarri after you?" he asked the peddler. "What did you do?"

Lunol shrugged. "I dwell in the Clith Korakam desert that stretches from the ocean here to the cliffs of Kamm."

Kael frowned his puzzlement.

It was Flaith who explained. "The black tower of Balzel lies in the Clith Korakam desert. It is a place forbidden to all people of Senorech."

The old man whimpered his fright. "I saw a man come out of that tower. It was many months ago. He was a tall man with a bald head and scrawny, withered arms. And yet there was something in the manner of his walking, something in the way he held his head, that sent a cold chill of terror down my spine!

"Since then I have had dreams. Terrible, frightening dreams! Dreams of places where no man has ever been! The sfarri have been hunting me since then. It took them a long time to find me, but now—"

Lunol shrugged. "From here it is not far to Clith Korakam. Once I am on its sands no man will ever be able to find me! I've spent all my life on those sands. I know them as I know the fingers of my hands."

Kael looked at Flaith. "Sure, they'll be after us, too, now! They know what we

look like. They'll want us for helping this one get away."

"What can we do?"

The old peddler smiled. His swart face lighted under the loose cowl of his kufiyah.

"Come with me. I will make a home for you on the desert where none shall ever find you."

Flaith said, "Perhaps they won't know about us. We left the sfarri lying like dead men, remember!"

Lunol looked his interest.

Kael said, "I touched my harp and the sfarri fell like poisoned insects. Why they fell I do not know. Do you?"

Lunol shrugged his shoulders. "I am an ignorant man. I do not know about these things. But this I do know. If we do not go into the desert, sooner or later the sfarri will find us!"

They set off across the sands, past the highhumped rocks that were beaten and weathered by the fierce storms that ravaged the planet. They struggled across the burning wasteland, their throats choked with the heat and the sand.

The sun glowed down on them, making sweat run in tiny rivers that plastered their robes to their flesh. The hours went by. Night came, and they slept where they fell, exhausted.

With the sun, they were up and moving. The days came and went, long eternities of heat and thirst, through which they plodded in the shifting sands. They were tiny motes of life against a backdrop of level, desolate loneliness.

They crossed ancient beds of rock, where once, in forgotten eons, a sea had rolled. Here Kael had to lift and carry Flaith, for her thin sandals were gone, and her white feet were red with blood where the stones had cut them.

They went on an on. They stopped at an oasis, here and there, to quench their thirst in the cool waters of a subterranean spring. They ate of the dried figs and bits of hard black bread that Lunol carried in his girdle.

Toward dusk of their sixth day on the desert, Lunol cried out. They focussed eyes salt-encrusted with dried sweat where his finger pointed.

"There! See yonder, and know Lunol did not lie!"

THERE was livid fear in the eyes of the old peddler as he gestured at the glistening black pile of the tower lifting upward from the sand. It was almost as if he expected to see something dark and fearsome slip from the basalt blocks and come hunting him.

"It's been there for thousands of years," he whimpered. "Even when the balangs roamed these sands, the tower was there."

Flaith came close to Kael. "I'm frightened! There's something wrong with it."

Kael snorted and walked forward through the sand, ploughing his way where the wind had piled thick granules. Flaith ran a few steps after him, her hand seeking his arm. Behind them, could hear the peddler moaning.

"I tell you," he chattered, "I've seen it come out of the tower on clear nights when there wasn't a wind stirring across the sand. It just moved around, all white and shining, making the sand lift and whirl, like a storm down off the Barakian hills. It was cold. Terribly cold! The sand was frozen solid where it had been."

The McCanahan stared at the tower. It was tall, formed of black basalt, a thick column of rock that was windowless and seemingly doorless. At the base of the column was a long, low building that stretched on either side of the tower for forty feet. Two red pylons, carved and polished, stood like pointing fingers at its ends.

The old peddler was wringing his hands. "It wasn't human, that thing. It could kill as easy as a harlot winks! Once I saw a hare run past it. It stretched out a thin wire of that cold white stuff and touched the rabbit, and the rabbit died. I'm afraid!"

Kael turned and caught the old peddler, yanking him to him.

"You've bleated and brayed ever since we got out of Clonn Fell! Go back if you want!"

The old man's eyes glazed in his brown face. A wind stirred the wisps of whitish hair that straggled from under his kufiyah, and the springs of thin beard that fluttered on his chin. He seemed to shake himself, and at an effort, his eyes cleared.

"No! No! You saved me from the sfarri. I told you the tower was the only place where the sfarri never came, on all of Senn. But to go to the tower, to meet that thing—"

The McCanahan let the old man go, gently. He was ashamed of the burst of rage that had shaken him. He drew in a lungful of the hot desert air. He was alone on Senn. His comrades in the *Eclipse* had been destroyed. The High Mor was seeking him across a world, and to have this peddler whimpering his fear in his ears was proving too much.

He said gently, "Sorry, old one! Sooner or later the sfarri will come here to the tower. After they have searched all Senn. They will find us. Maybe inside that tower—"

Unlul shivered. "No man can live inside the tower. No man can approach it. Death strikes down all who try! I've seen too many animals run close to it and—hofff!—they go up in smoke! There's a band of death all around it. If you go too close, you'll be the one to turn into smoke!"

Kael McCanahan shrugged. "As well go up in smoke as die under a Thorn blaster held in a sfarran hand!"

He went on alone.

Flaith whimpered, watching him. She crouched, her long-nailed fingers digging into the soft flesh of a white thigh. Her eyes were wide, frightened.

He went twenty feet, then thirty. He grew smaller, walking across the flat stretch of dunes toward the great black tower.

As he walked, the McCanahan threw his blaster, fastened on a length of rope, ahead of him. If some electrical force was probing, it would seek out the metal of his addy-gun and shatter it.

Nothing happened to the gun.

He walked on and on.

No death struck at him. Now he stood under the shadow of the great gateway that was formed of a queer, sleek marble that held green fire frozen beneath its glazed surface. He put a hand on the gate and pushed.

To his surprise, the doorway opened, noiselessly.

Kael moved under the arched gateway, into a region of dim light and sharp black shadow, where a towering pile of glass and metal bulked huge in the center of the hall.

And then his legs crumbled beneath him, and Kael McCanahan went down, onto the tiled yellow flooring of the tower room.



## IV

HE FLOATED bodiless in space. The stars swirled about him, moving endlessly in their orbits. This was death, he knew. But it was a strange form of death, for here and there he could recognize familiar constellations, saw nebulae and galaxies that he knew.

*This is not Noorlythin!*

The voice swirled about him, rumbling out of the black stretches of space itself. The McCanahan could feel eyes on him, hidden eyes that probed at him, lancing through him with the remorseless certainty of a surgeon's electronscalpel.

*This is a Terran. A man named McCanahan. He is frightened!*

*He was within the tower. Only Noorlythin could live in that trap of hell. I do not understand!*

Something touched him, as gently as a Spring breeze off the sea. And with the touching, the eyes of Kael McCanahan came open to the robed figures that floated between the stars. He tried to see their faces, but only a blinding whiteness returned his stare, under the low hoods of the robes.

*Seek not our faces, Terran. To you, we are as the sun!*

His tongue was thick and swollen. He mumbled. He swallowed, as if to clear his throat.

"Where am I? Who are you? I walked into the tower and—"

What had happened to him on that yellow floor? His knees had buckled and he had gone down with an intangible force crushing him. Kael shook his head.

*We are the Doyen. An ancient race, a race of once-men who have lived out the span of our lives a million centuries. In that time, we changed. Our bodies evolved upward from their primal shape, striving always to progress to that last, final shape of all.*

"Noorlythin? He is one of you?"

*Once he was. But Noorlythin could never forget the adoration that was showered on us by the sfarri. He hungered to be worshipped as a god, as once he was, many eons ago. Noorlythin turned his back to us, the Doyen. He has gone back, resuming the*

*primal shapes of the men whose race is young.*

Fear came to McCanahan there among the stars. It crept in through the unspoken words of the robed things, clutching at his mind with frozen fingers. He shook uncontrollably before he could assert himself.

"This Noorlythin. You seek him?"

*He has broken the Doyen law. He has become as an animal. With his powers, he can be a god to any primal race. No primele can stand to him, and well he knows it. When he is ready, when he has used the sfarri to conquer all the primal races of the galaxy, he will ascend into the living sacristsy of the Temple of Sharrador. There, once again, he will be worshipped with living sacrifices, with orgies that only a primal race can conceive and execute.*

The McCanahan said, "You aren't telling me all this just to talk."

*You are a poor servant. Your flesh is weak. Yet must we use you against Noorlythin!*

"How? How can I help?"

And then all space was shaking, flowing in a liquid stream, inward toward a whirlpool of light that swam around and around, sucking the stars and the black deeps of space into its maw. And as the stars and space flowed faster and faster, so flowed McCanahan stretched and lengthened and tortured. . .

HE SAT on the yellow tile of the ancient tower. A tumble of red hair shifted and tossed before him as Flaith's white hand shook him. Beyond her, near the open green marble door, stood the peddler. His eyes burned with the fright in his face.

"Kael! You were so still. I thought you dead!"

She helped him to his feet. He swayed, almost retching with the pain that spasmed his muscles. Flaith was a blur of white before him. He put his hands to her soft shoulders, and his fingers dug in. He held to her, as to reality.

Slowly the floor solidified and steadied beneath his buskined feet. The pain slid away, slowly, then with greater speed.

"Out there," he said thickly. "Things. Bright things. Maybe made of energy itself. They spoke to me. Told me about something

named Noorlythin. It was as if I was suspended in space itself. Want me to help them."

Flaith came against him until the hard tips of her breasts burned his naked chest. Her voice was a flow of terrified sound.

"The Doyen! They are the Doyen! We on Senn always thought they were just a myth, like the balangs! They are gods, Kael! The gods of all space!"

The McCanahan grunted. "Well, gods or not, they want to make a servant out of me. They want me to help them round up some character named Noorlythin."

From the doorway the peddler groaned. His eyes rolled in his head. A white froth bubbled on his lips.

"Noorlythin, the evil! Noorlythin, who lived in the olden days, when all Senorech worshipped him with blood sacrifices. Even today, on the altar in the Temple of Krebb, the dark stains are still there!"

The McCanahan turned away to stare upward at the great metal machine that bulked monstrous in the dim light. It was formed of black steel and silvery chrome. Its tubes and power relays were inset under thin glass globules so that it resembled a gigantic, transparent-backed spider. High above its arching shell, reaching upward into the dimness of the tower itself, were half a hundred floating, glowing balls that danced and spun in the wind eddies.

Stretching on either side of the central hall were wide corridors, their walls lined by glass bubbles that projected outward like bulging eyes.

The McCanahan moved toward the near corridor, his eyes caught by a scene within one of the glassine bubbles. Flaith followed him, afraid to be alone.

They halted before a curving prism, discovering it to be a dioramic window that seemed to peer into the heart of a distant planet. Flaith whispered, "It's the planet Sfar! I'd know those cold-faced men anywhere!"

Frozen, tiny faces stared back at them from a great, white city, set like a jewel on the shore of a wide, blue sea. The little figures were caught in a locked moment of time, attending to their duties. Some moved with weapons, some drove sleek monocats.

"There's something about them," Kael muttered, scowling. "They're so perfect! They make every move count as if it would be their last. Each of them is long and lean, with bright, keen eyes that never miss a thing!"

Flaith put a hand on the glassine bubble, leaning closer, staring down at the magnified scene. "It's funny, but—"

Her slant eyes slid sideways at the McCanahan, amusement swimming in them. "I've noticed something that I thought you'd see, Kael McCanahan!"

His eyes studied the girl in front of him as she cocked her head at him. Even in her tattered garments, through which the McCanahan caught disturbing glimpses of white, rounded flesh, the redhaired Flaith was a tantalizing morsel of womanhood. He put out a long arm and drew her in against him.

"Och, now what would I have been missing that you, with your cat's eyes, have seen?"

She shrugged elaborately. "If you haven't missed them, I won't tell—"

"Shades of Bridget na Gablach! Their women!"

"They have no women! No man of Senorech has ever seen a sfarran girl. Rumor says that they shelter them because of their loveliness. But if this a diorama of the sfarran planet, and there are no women, then—"

Kael grunted. "You and your crazy theories! Look, woman! See for yourself. There are women there. There must be women!"

But though they hunted along all that corridor, staring at the sfarran world and its divers shapes and colors, its desert storms and wind-tossed seas, its magnificent white cities that looked like milky jewels, they found no woman.

For two hours they hunted, until the McCanahan discovered that by moving a red lever he could make the scenes within the bubbles come to life. The tiny men moved, as if released from a frozen tomb. They walked and piloted their vessels, and went about their tasks. Yet even so, no woman appeared.

"It's some sort of televisic communicator," the McCanahan muttered, "That's

spacecasting across a billion billion miles of space."

"They have no hospitals, either," said Flaith in a troubled voice.

"Now what will you be meaning by that?"

THE redhead smiled wryly. "Even in this advanced day and age on Senorech, Kael my darling, women still go to hospitals to have their babies!"

The McCanahan scowled. "And if there are no hospitals, they'll have their brats at home, won't they?"

"Brats, indeed!" flared Flaith, whirling, chin high.

"Peace, peace," grinned Kael. "It's only teasing I was. But I begin to see your drift, mavourneen. No women, no hospitals, no children. Then the sfarri are not human. Or maybe it's because they're ovopoid. Maybe they're sexless, like an amoeba, or maybe they fertilize themselves and lay an egg to hatch a little sfarran."

"There are no little sfarri. All are grown men. Every last one."

McCanahan brooded with his lower lip thrust out. "No little ones. No coibche to bind a man and a woman in holy matehood. No women, even, to comfort a man when he's sad with loneliness. Then they aren't human, with no heart in their chests to beat a little faster at the kiss from a woman's lips. And if they have no hearts, they must be—

"Robots!"

The McCanahan walked in his excitement, taking long steps that drew him past the metal machine with its glass-encased tubes and wirings. "Robots! No wonder they're perfect! No wonder it is that none has ever been caught by a Terran battlefleet for questioning! Being robots, they destroy themselves before capture. And being robots, too, they fight with the same mechanized, incredible fury that's smashed a dozen war fleets between Achernar and Sol."

The McCanahan was warming to his subject. "We fought the sfarri across a score of galaxies, ever since my grandfather Rhoderick—bless his memory!—first crossed atomic disintegration beams with their cruisers. They've pushed us back, away from

the Rim planets. Everywhere our paths have met, there's been bloody war. Bloody? Ha! There's been no blood spilled on their side. Just cogs and wheels and wire!"

Flaith tossed back a lock of reddish gold hair from before her eyes. "You killed them in Clonn Fell. You slew them when you touched your harp strings! The sound did it."

"The harp of Brith Tsinan. Aie! It had the silver string that I took from my father's wrist attached to it. Do you remember how I broke the other, when I threw the harp on the road from Akkalan? Where is the harp, Flaith?"

The old peddler came shuffling forward from the doorway, dropping his shoulder to loosen the strap that held the black sack to his back. From the sack the bright silver harp tumbled into the McCanahan's eager fingers.

He lifted the harp and set it to his shoulder. His hands played across the strings, and the wild sharp peal of the strings swept up and through the tower.

In answer to the high, keening notes, a tube in the great metal machine spanned shrilly. The tinkle of broken glass was loud in the sudden silence as Kael dropped his fingers from the quivering harp strings.

Lunol, the peddler, cried out harshly, his face a wet mass of sweating fear. Flaith screamed high and shrill. Her bare arm lifted and pointed.

The McCanahan whirled, and his harp fell from numb fingers.

Bright and blazing, like the core of a giant sun, a whirling mass of fiery matter whirled and quivered, pulsing before the great machine. Its incandescence was blinding, brilliant. They could read the fury in the flame of its sentient heart. They needed no voice to tell them.

*Noorlythin!*

The sunburst of brilliance lifted, shuddering. It foamed and grew, incandescent in the sheer brilliance of the white fire that burst and bloomed within it.

A thin stream of fire reached out, touched Lunol and laved him in its blinding whiteness.

And Lunol shrank in upon himself, grew smaller, almost tiny within the bubble of brilliance that held him. He grew, then.

Expanded suddenly. And where Lunol and the hungry white fire had been was just blackened smoke, drifting across the yellow floor.

Flaith turned her face in against Kael's chest. Her fingers bit their nails convulsively into his flesh. Her body shook so badly that its trembling moved the McCanahan as he stood on firmly planted legs.

Another pencil of fire stabbed out.

Stabbed out, and—

Halted!

In midair it halted, spreading across an invisible wall of nothingness that was erected before the McCanahan and the girl he held.

There was puzzlement in the pulsing of the thing, in the blind, angry dartings of the pencil-beam of flame. It moved to the floor, and quested upward to the ceiling. It darted from wall to wall, seeking to penetrate the barrier that sheltered its victims.

And now the amazement was gone. The white fire burned lower, as if afraid.

In sheer anger, that made it blaze so brightly that Kael cried out and lifted a hand to hide his face, the thing stabbed again. And again, hungrily, raging with insane fury.

*The Doyen shelter you! Only the Doyen could stand against the power of my will!*

McCanahan could feel the anger fall away before the fear that ate at the thing. Almost, he could hear its thoughts. Perhaps it wanted him to hear his thoughts.

*They can save you for a little while. But they cannot shelter you forever. Not from Noorlythin-the-Doyen can they save you forever! I shall work my will on you yet, man of Terra! You will crawl on bloody stumps for legs, waving handless arms for mercy! Begging me with tongueless mouth for the boon of death!*

It came to McCanahan that the thing spoke out of the grip of its own, paralysing terror. It mouthed threats to bolster its own esteem.

Kael put his mind to the task and forced a laugh between his lips. He made his laugh mocking, challenging.

"You'll never kill me, Noorlythin! I am servant to the Doyen. Such as the Doyen protect those whom they select to serve them!"

The thing that was Noorlythin pulsed like a stream of cobwebs caught in a mad wind. It lifted and shook, swirled and belled.

And then, suddenly, it was quiet. It hung a foot above the yellow tile, barely moving. And the inertia of the thing was more frightening than all its blinding brilliance.

*The Doyen play the game according to its rules. They will not let me harm you with my Doyen powers. Only by other gifts can I let the life from your body, Terran! So be it!*

## V

AND the thing was gone, blanking instantly from sight with nothing left behind to show its presence but a bit of black dust stirring restlessly on the tiling as a breeze came in off the desert and moved down the long corridor.

"Poor Lunol," whispered Flaith. "Oh, the poor old man!"

The McCanahan lifted his harp and stared dumbly at its glittering surface of polished silver. "The string from my father's wrist broke the tube in the machine. It summoned up Noorlythin from—from wherever he was hidden."

"How can you use that knowledge?" wondered Flaith.

Kael shook his head. "I don't know yet. But I will. Somehow, I'll find out the truth." He lifted his head and peered about the great tower. "And where better to begin than here?"

They ate dried meat plucked from Flaith's girdle-pouch, chewing on hard black bread. And then they slept, with Flaith cuddled against the McCanahan's length, with his own head pillowed on an arm, both of them stretched at the foot of the great metal machine.

It was the McCanahan who stirred first, rising from the soft body of the girl, carefully so as not to disturb her. Her wandered about the tower, studying the strange machines that glistened at him from the shadows. A man would need a dozen lifetimes to understand these things, he told himself. He would find no help from them.

He tried to fight the pall of bitter despair that lay across his shoulders. He was the

servant of the gods of space, caught up by them to hunt out and punish another god.

Laughter touched his lips; but the bitterness in it stung like acid.

How does one fight a god? How does one go about killing a thing that is made only of white, radiant energy? A thing that by a mere touch of the blazing brightness that comprises it, can blast him and all his kind to a black dust that shifts restlessly across a floor, flung by an errant breeze!

His fists were clenched until the knotted muscles of his forearms ached. "I can't do it," he told the machines. "I'm only a man. I can't fight against a god!"

Deep within him, he knew that someone had to make this fight, that someone from one of the thousands of Terran worlds had to face Noorlythin, had to stand to him and his awesome power, or the human race itself would go down, crushed and torn and flung into nothingness, as a sand castle went down before the relentless roll of the ocean.

When that happened, the sfarri and the Senn would expand, would lift their faery castles and their monstrous, monolithic palaces, where now Terran buildings stood. And those of the Senn would have their pick of the women of Earth.

Of women like—

Flaith!

He turned to find her stretched on her back, her eyes regarding him wistfully. A shred of her gypsy costume was caught over one shoulder, falling away from the push of her nearly bared breasts. The thin stuff at her waist hugged round hips and full upper thighs. The breath caught in the McCananah's throat as his eyes ran over her.

She was a woman to steal the breath of a man from his lungs, and send his senses running in a saraband. She was the dream of every lonely spaceman at his battle station, of every thul-prospecter hanging to a wandering asteroid with fingers and a suction clamp. With her red hair frothing over the witchery of her cream-skinned shoulders, she was Deirdre herself, the perfect woman.

Something of his tangled senses came to Flaith and she laughed, with the throaty womanness of her pleased at the worship in his eyes.

In the middle of her laughter, a shadow came and lay on the yellow flooring be-

tween them.

A sfarran officer stood tall and lean in the open doorway of the tower, a glittering Thorn blaster in his right hand.

THE officer regarded them coldly. It came to Kael as he stood dumbly returning that hard glance, that he had never seen a sfarran smile.

"You will come with me at once."

He stood sideways to the green marble doors, giving them room to pass him. Flaith scrambled to her feet; eyeing the gesture with which the officer moved his blaster. The McCananah bent and lifted his harp, and thrust it into the black sack that had once belonged to dead Lunol the peddler.

Then he was walking with Flaith out the pylon gateway of the tower, across the hot sands toward the black hull of a sleek sfarran cruiser.

He was midway through the hatch when he paused, staring.

There were sfarran men and officers inside the ship, but they were slumped over queerly, in distorted postures and attitudes. He had seen the sfarri like that in Clonn Fell, when he had plucked at the strings of his harp. But here he had not struck those strings!

Last night he had played for Flaith and Lunol. And when he had played, a tube in the great, glistening tower machine had cracked into a thousand different fragments.

That breaking tube might have summoned up Noorlythin from whatever hell he dwelt.

"Move in, Earther," said the officer behind him.

Kael went with Flaith, at the officer's orders, to an upholstered bench set against a panelled wall. The officer brooded at them, and they could read the raw hate that lay deep in his black eyes.

The officer said, "You ought to be rayed down here, to save the High Mor the agony of listening to your pleas for mercy. But yours is a grave offense. An offense no man or woman has ever committed before. It calls for grave punishment."

Flaith's hand trembled in Kael's big fist.

The officer said, "The High Mor commissioned me to bring you to him. I would be derelict in my duty were I to do otherwise. And I, Captain Herms Borkus, intend



to commit no such infraction."

The black eyes studied them. There was curiosity swimming in their depths, mixed with the hot hate, and a grudging respect. He turned away and went forward to the control chamber. Kael could hear the clicking relays picking up the automatic transmission. The ship lifted easily, its null-gravity humming with smooth insistence.

Flaith whispered, "The harp, Kael. You'll kill him as you killed the others!"

But Kael only gestured at the sfarri that lay in the strange and distorted attitudes, or sprawled on the floor. And even as he gestured, the first of these dead sfarri stirred and sat up, looking about him. Others moved then, silently, turning at once to their duty posts, resuming their tasks as if they had never been interrupted.

"Mother of balangs!" whispered Flaith, her eyes wide and troubled under their long red lashes. "They live!"

The McCanahan was half out of his seat, his mind questing. *They were dead, but now they live. Like machines, turned off and on!* He thought of the cracking tube in the black tower, and the sfarri that had fallen in the square in Clonn Fell. Dimly, he began to grasp the power of the harp-string that he had lifted from his father's wrist. It smashed the tubes in the power-boxes that fed the sfarri their energy. Without that power, they were idle machines.

With the trained mind of the spacefleet officer, he saw the possibilities of such harp-string, in the form of a vibrator that would spaccast a flow of microwaves from the battlewagons of the fleet. With a series of these vibrations fanning out ahead of them, Solar Combine ships could more than hold their own with the sfarri. For at the touch of those microwaves, the sfarri that ran their spaceships would slump in their form of death.

Bitter mockery rose inside the McCanahan as he sat hunched over. He had the knowledge, but what use was it? He was being carried to an extremely painful death in the damp dungeons of the High Mor's palace.

HERMS BORKUS came toward them from the control chamber. He stared from one to the other. At last he said, "How did you do it? In Clonn Fell, we found our

officers and men lying as if dead. As this ship neared the Tower of Noorlythin, my men slumped over unconscious."

Kael shrugged. "I've a powerful evil eye, friend. I cast it at those I don't like and—well, you saw the result."

Borkus said coldly, "You talk foolishly. There is no such thing as the evil eye. What is the answer?"

"Oh, now look!" began Kael, when the thought struck him, *Borkus is a sfarran, yet he did not succumb to the lack of power!* Kael turned the words on his tongue, and said, "I was talking sense, captain. In my family, as far back as the time of Niall of the Nine Hostages himself, one of the McCanahans has always possessed the evil eye. It's a daft thing, and I'm not understanding it myself, any too well, but it's the only explanation I can give."

Borkus looked at Flaith, but his eyes did not linger on her beauty, and showed no more emotion than a dog would show staring at a building. From Flaith, his eyes swung to Kael who could read the thought that was gripping the officer. *He's wondering if he can strike at me through her.* But that was the way of a man who lacked confidence in his own abilities, and Kael knew that this man before him had powers he had not yet used.

The sfarran captain shrugged and moved away. He threw back over his shoulder, "The High Mor will know how to deal with you. After all, it is his duty, not mine."

For five hours, Flaith and McCanahan huddled together on the upholstered bench in the sfarran ship. With each passing moment, the bleakness in the soul of the McCanahan grew darker and more empty.

The ship landed on the palace grounds, shuddering slightly as it dropped onto the metallic tanbark. A moment after its vanes were clamped, Flaith and the McCanahan were crossing the landing field, moving down a stone ramp that led to the dungeons.

A burly man, with black hair matted over his naked chest, clanked a ring of keys at their approach. He preceded them along the torchlit corridor until he paused at an empty cell.

The cell was unlocked, and the McCanahan thrust inside. And then a sobbing Flaith was dragged away from him, in the

grip of one of the burly man's hairy paws.

Kael McCanahan was a spaceman, and spacemen are generally, without quite being aware of it, excellent philosophers. He tested the bars of the cell, found them to be formed of Mollstyl, and went over to the cot, where he lay on his back, staring at the blank ceiling. Within five minutes he was asleep.

He woke to the touch of a soft hand on his chest, to find a woman bent above him, her limpid brown eyes soft with pity. A tumble of yellow hair framed her oval face.

"I bring you food and drink, lord. You will need your strength for what lies ahead."

Kael laughed harshly. "Better to be weak and near death when the High Mor begins his tortures."

She moved closer. She was fragrant with some Senn perfume, and the little she wore—a red silk thing twisted about her loins, with a slavegirl's golden chains about her throat—showed her body to be exquisite, even in the halfflight of the cell. The McCanahan read the pity in her eyes, and began to take interest.

"Sometimes, those live the longest who have no false pride," she told him.

"You give me hope. Were you sent to do that?"

There was reproach in her eyes, and she started to draw away. The McCanahan caught her slim wrist and held her.

"Who sent you with your tempting offers?"

She pouted at him. "No man sent me. I am Slyss, the slave girl from Aakkan." She rubbed her wrist when he released her, unconsciously posing for his eyes.

The McCanahan said, "Tell me more!"

But she shrugged a white shoulder and went to stand by the cell bars while he ate. When he was done, she took his tray and wooden bowl and mug, and walked off with them, unlocking the cell door with a key that hung from her wrist, attached to a thick metal manacle.

Her hips wriggled as she went, and she threw a glance at him over her shoulder. Her voice was music as she carolled a farewell.

She left the McCanahan with a fever of impatience in him. He strode back and forth in his cell. His hands tested the molly-

steel bars a hundred times. He told himself that the Senn did not love the sfarri overmuch, that the Senn, being descended from animal ancestors, had no common ground with a race of robot men. He asked himself where in this pile of giant masonry Herms Borkus had hidden Flaith. If he could get away, if he could use this yellow-haired slave girl to unbar these cell doors for him, he would find Flaith and flee.

Flee?

Where on all Senorech was there sanctuary for Kael McCanahan?

The slave girl told him when next she brought his food. This time, he was awake and restless, and her soft, quick tread was like music to his ears.

SHE came close to him, with only the width of the little tray between his chest and her breasts that stirred gently to her quickened breathing. Her brown eyes were full of gentle pity as they studied his haggard face and sunken eyes.

"Lord, you were never meant for prison bars! If only you would trust me, I know a way that leads from the palace."

"Trust you, Slyss? I'd love you for a chance at freedom."

Again she preened, smiling as he wolfed the food. "Only for that?"

His eyes studied her. She was a lovely thing, slim and gently rounded. Beside the flame-haired Flaith she was a cooling breeze, but he knew many men who would have walked through the fires of Nanakar for an hour in her arms.

"Not only for that," he told her. "You're a sight to send a man's blood to pounding in his veins. You don't look like a slave girl. You're much too beautiful."

Her laughter was soft, pleased. She came and sat beside him, so that her hip and thigh were warm on his. She carried perfume in the yellow hair that dripped on her shoulders. It was rare perfume, and the McCanahan thought that if her mistress knew about it, that creamy back would be striped with red whipwelts.

"There are men of the Senn who hate the sfarri," she whispered close to his ear. "Rumors have come to them that you possess some strange weapon, some magic means of killing the hated sfarri."

The McCanahan swallowed the cheap wine that had been chilled in a coil of refrigerated stil. He nodded. "I know a way."

It was on his lips to say more when his sidewise glance surprised a momentary gleam in the gentle brown eyes. He needed no psychiatrist to read that triumph for him, even though it was quickly veiled behind her curving lashes. *Now why should a slave girl of the palace know that feeling because of what I said?* he asked himself.

The McCanahan put his arm about the girl, drew her in against him. With his lips buried in the yellow mass of her hair, he whispered, "It ought to be worth a lot to the Senn to get that knowledge! With such a weapon they need never fear the sfarri again. They could cast them out! Even seek alliance with the Solar Combine!"

It was his last words that tensed the muscles across her soft back. Instantly, the muscles were relaxed, and she melted closer against him, her soft lips moving across his face to find his lips.

The McCanahan kissed her. Why not? But he was warned, and only a fool disregards a warning. And Kael McCanahan, as he drank from the scented lips of Slyss the slave girl, was even then congratulating himself that no McCanahan was ever a cursed gossoon.

He let her go after a while. She was a pleasant little thing, but she was no Flaith. He said, "Suppose I agree to trade my weapon for freedom from the High Mor? How do I know the Senn can guarantee my liberty?"

"I have the keys," she whispered. "Tonight I will come for you, to lead you through the dungeons, to the vaults below the dungeons, where the sea seeps in through solid rocks. No sfarran ever walks down there. It is a dead, damp place. But the Senn go there to hide from the sfarri. It is the one safe place on all Senorech. Slyss will take you there."

He lingered over her lips, close by the unlocked cell door, to bind their bargain. But when she was gone, he took to pacing his cell, his brows drawn together. She wants more than the body of Kael McCanahan, that one, he told himself. The weapon I possess, and me! Or am I playing the buf-

foon in thinking she was fond of me? He went back over their meetings and discovered to his chagrin that each of her moves seemed calculated. Like a sfarran! Cold, careful! Even her kisses lacked the fire such a woman should bring to them!

As the sun sank below the hills above Akkalam, the McCanahan rested. He was fresh when Slyss came to him on her bare feet, her key grating silently into the cell lock. "Slib, the jailer, lies drugged with wine," she told him. "He won't stop us."

She went quickly along the cell corridor ahead of him. At an intersection in the rock walls she slipped to the right, into dark shadows. He heard the rough grate of metal, and a section of the floor was rising and falling, as a balanced slab of rock fell back to expose a number of handhewn stone ledges that served as steps.

Slyss went first. The McCanahan came after her, and at her whispered bidding, tilted the stone slab back into place. An instant before it fell, as his eyes were still above the floor level, he saw a man standing in the cell corridor, grinning at him.

The McCanahan almost cried out to Slyss.

The man in the cell corridor was burly, with black hair matted over his chest. He jangled a ring of keys at his side. It was Slib, the jailer, and his little eyes were clear and evil.

No man who lay drugged with wine ever boasted eyes like that! The only thing that troubled Kael was whether Slyss knew the jailer was awake and watching. If she knew, then he was being led into a trap, like a steer to the axing. If she did not know, then she was taking herself unwittingly into that same trap.

The McCanahan kicked off his buskins and walked with bare feet after the girl, along the cool damp floor of the sea vaults. In olden days, the primal men of Senorech had made their coves in these vaults to escape the ravening monsters of the dawn era. Here and there, in the light of the torches along the wall, he could see piles of white, bleached bones.

They walked for more minutes before he heard the faint rasp of metal touching rock.

Slyss was whirling, crying out.

From the shadows, men came leaping.

As he plunged sideways, Kael noted that they were hardfaced Senn warriors. There was not a sfarran among them.

The McCanahan used his fist like a club, bringing its balled weight down in a full arm stroke, hitting the nearest man at the side of his neck, and driving him sideways into his companions. Before the man's falling club touched the floor, Kael held it, bringing it upward in a ceilingwise blow into the middle of the next man's belly.

Kael McCanahan had fought in the port taverns of Marsopolis and Dunverick. He had traded fists with Deneban dockwalllopers and Karrvan stevedores. He knew every trick in the creeds of a dozen fighting races.

He used them all in the sea vaults below Akkalam. He used the club like a sword, driving it hard into a Senn's face. He hit backwards with it. He used an overhand, downward stroke, that drove the inches-long spikes that studded its knob, deep into a man's braincase.

It is no easy matter for ten men to cage one man. Not in dimly lighted pits, with that one man an explosive cyclone of fists and bashing club. Ten men keep getting in the way of each other. And Kael McCanahan was there to make each mistake a costly one.

He cut his opponents down to five in those first few minutes. Then he was at the wall, ripping loose the olisenc-drenched torch, hurling it in their faces, to splatter in thick little globs of burning chemicals.

With their screams of pain ringing in the sudden darkness, the McCanahan slid forward into the blacker shadows. Out of sight he ran.

He found a tunnel that sliced at an angle into the main vault. He went along it, his bare feet making no sound.

He discovered another converging corridor and raced along that. Inside ten minutes, he lost himself in the labyrinthine vaults.

He came to a halt in the blackness, lungs gulping at cool air that was faintly spiced with seasalt. He listened, but heard no sound. When his heart ceased to thud so heavily against his ribs, he moved again. But now he went more cautiously, with the club before him like an overlong arm, probing the darkness.

He felt the cool updraft of air, just as his feet went out from under him.

## VI

HE SLID for thirty feet on a wet ramp that dropped him flat on his back on the floor of a huge chamber lighted by radioactive filaments set flush to the stone walls. At the far end of the vast room, two mighty metal doors were hung on great bronze hinges.

On the floor of the room rested a hundred great daises. And on each dais lay a man or a woman.

"A tomb," the McCanahan muttered. "I've found one of the Senn burial chambers."

As he crawled to his feet and stared, he knew that this was no tomb. The bodies were flushed with life, and clad in the uniforms and trappings of a hundred different people. The McCanahan rubbed a bruised shoulder and went to walk among the daises.

A shepherd boy with a ragged sheepskin across his loins and over one shoulder, lay beside a trimly garbed officer of the Palace Guard. Beyond them, a silk-swathed dancing girl lay beside a heavily muscled halgor-driver, with the brown of the desert sun still on his forehead.

The McCanahan touched an arm. It was warm. It yielded beneath his fingers. He tried to rouse the man, without success.

A face in the third row over from the main aisle tugged at some chord of memory. He slipped between the daises, to stare down into the cold, haughty face of Captain Herms Borkus of the Fleet.

"Now would I had the wisdom of Bridget herself, the wisest woman in all Ireland," muttered the McCanahan. "Is this a store-room where the High Mor keeps those he has doomed to some punishment? Is it a place such as the visi-chambers on Vreer and Anafelm, where men and women spend most of their lives dreaming? And if it isn't any of these things, what in the name of the sons of Strongbow is it?"

He walked on, staring down at the faces of those who lay in this trance-like slumber. He saw a face or two he knew from remembered glimpses, in the days when he had walked the court of the High Mor as the son of the Terran Ambassador.

And then the McCanahan froze, and the

blood in his veins moved with sluggish torpor.

Ahead of him, on the two largest daises of all, lay the twin bodies of the High Mor.

There was no mistake. He had seen that thin-lipped face too often where it leered down at Solar Command uniforms from the ruboid throne of Akkalam. The eyes were staring now, lifeless, but he remembered the scorn and the supreme contempt that had been in their depths.

The McCanahan was a baffled man.

He walked around the coffers, and his lips opened to speak, but no sound came out. "It's dreaming I am, with the little people flooding my brain with fancies from a fevered mind! The High Mor, twins—no, triplets!—for he must sit even now on the throne, dreaming up tortures for my body."

The creak of a door-hinge sent him to the floor.

He stared at the opening door, and smothered a curse in his throat when he saw the slave girl, Slyss of Aakan, glide into the room. She was alone. She went to an empty pier and lay upon her back.

And now the hair at the base of the McCanahan's neck stood straight up, for something was rising from all along her body. A something that was white and bright and dazzling, and from where he lay, Kael could feel the utter coldness of the thing.

"Noorlythin!" his numbed brain told him, and he hid his eyes.

He heard a faint tinkling, such a sound as he had heard once before, when he floated between the stars among the Doyen. He looked, and the swirling white radiance that was Noorlythin was settling down on one of the bodies of the High Mor, and the High Mor was sitting up, chafing at wrists and fingers, swinging his legs to the floor.

In the ancient legends of Terra, there was mention of an Arabic ruler, one Haroun al Raschid, who went in disguise among his people, that he might learn their thoughts and their way of living. It came to the McCanahan as he lay here that Noorlythin was such a one, but he used no simple disguises. He took the body of a man, or the body of a woman, and possessed it.

Kael retched silently, remembering the caresses he had given the slave girl. That

thing had been inside her, controlling the pity in her eyes, the poses of her body. It had been Noorlythin who had led him into the vaults below the castle, for some reason he did not yet know. It had been Herms Borkus, seeking the secret of his harp. He knew now why the smashing of the tube in the great machine had not shut off his lack of motive power, as it had the robotlike bodies of the sfarran crew.

"By all the sand on Mars," the McCanahan gritted between his teeth, "I have a secret worth a thousand sins in my hand. But how can I best use it?"

The High Mor was at the huge doors now. He went out without a backward glance, and the doors slid shut behind him.

K AEL came to his feet. He looked around him at the faces of the men and women who lay awaiting the coming of the Doyen. He knew what he had to do, and his face twisted in repugnance. Without these bodies, Noorlythin was trapped in the body of the High Mor; he was the High Mor, and no other. If these bodies were destroyed, smashed beyond recognition, Noorlythin could never use them, perhaps to appear again before the McCanahan in the guise of an officer or beautiful woman.

Kael gripped his club more firmly and walked slowly down the long rows of coffers. At each dais, he paused a little while and did what had to be done. Once he stripped a man and donned the uniform of the Senn Fleet, acquiring the rank of major.

He left Slyss until the last.

But when he stood there, looking down into that smooth face, eyeing the yellow hair that tumbled around the creamy shoulders, he could not nerve himself to the task at hand.

"I'll let her be. At least I know her as a cradle for Noorlythin. I'll be on my guard."

With a sword at his side and an addy-gun holstered to his service belt, the McCanahan dropped the club. He went to the doors and swung them open, and walked out into a long corridor hewn from living stone.

For nearly an hour he followed that corridor, travelling steadily upwards. He emerged into a palace guardroom whose rack-hung walls were filled with handguns and swords, with keen-edged axes and cloaks



with the dragon of the Senn emblazoned on collar and breast.

And in the guard room, he found the High Mor waiting for him.

"It is better this way," said the High Mor. "Just the two of us, face to face. I thought it might be better, as Slyss, to lure you into a Senn trap, and then to pretend a rescue by my sfarran guards just as they were about to torture you. I thought I might claim your allegiance that way."

The McCanahan showed his teeth. "And after you'd wormed the truth of my secret weapon out of me, you'd hang me to a rack with the metal hooks biting into my naked back, and pull on my legs until the hooks came out. After that—"

The High Mor waved a hand.

"There is no need of torture between us, Terran. Oh, at first I wanted your life. Your father stumbled on a Senn scientist who discovered that a certain microwave shattered a peculiar type glass much used by the sfarri, due to sonic disturbances created in the atmosphere.

"Since the sfarri are a race of robots, created by the Doyen so long ago that were I to tell you the number of years involved they would be meaningless to you, they are necessarily energized by machines. In those machines a klyptric tube, made of that glass, forms an antennae that picks up and transmits the power generated by the machine. It broadcasts it in wave-lengths attuned to the internal structure of the sfarri."

"You tell me nothing new," Kael grated. "Most of that I learned myself from putting one and two and three together."

The High Mor threw back his jeweled cloak and rested a thigh on the edge of a gaming table. His eyes glittered brightly.

He said, "You are no fool, Terran. I do not underestimate you, believe me. I tell you this to explain why I felt it necessary to kill your father."

"And Captain Edmunds! And Cassy Garson! And all the men who were in the *Eclipse* when your sfarrans rayed her into a smoking ruin just outside the planetary orbit of Senorech!"

The High Mor gestured. His graceful white hands waved apology. "For all that, I am sorry. I made a mistake. Now I offer what I can to atone for my errors.

"Join me. Wear my dragon! To you, I promise such power as no man has ever dreamed. The wants of a Napoleon, or a Bral Kan of Procyon! Not even Gartillin Vo of Deneb, or Cygnis Hannon will outshine you in the splendor of your triumphs!"

"Do you think I want to spend my time in this?" and here the High Mor gestured at his body. "I want to go back to the Temple of Sharrador where once I dwelt for many ages, worshipped and adored."

The McCanahan grinned. "You know I recognize you as Noorlythin?"

"You were in the chamber where I keep the bodies I use. I felt your presence."

Kael stared his surprise.

"I knew you watched," the High Mor went on. "I could have spoken to you there. But it is better to meet you this way, face to face, away from those reminders that I am not as you. In a humanoid body, I may speak with you, as man to man.

"Only this way can I hope to convince you that I offer you more than you can ever gain without me. I am no man. I am a god! A god of primal space! I have lived for eon piled upon eon, hunting and seeking through the stars, studying the worlds I found. On some I lived for ages, on others I dwelt for only a little while. All those worlds, Kael McCanahan, I offer you!"

"Be an emperor, Terran! Rule every planet in all space. The greatest jewels of Strae'eth or Vrann can be yours, to wear on your person or to be hung in ropes of diamonds about the neck of any woman in all space! Lead my battlefleets! On distant Sfar, my technicians shall make you a hundred billion sfarrans to serve under your banner. They shall make the greatest warships that ply the starlanes, each one encrusted with your name!"

The McCanahan shivered. It was a prospect that shook a man loose from his moorings.

To rule the stars! To sit on a throne and gaze out at the peoples of the universe bowed before him. To have the faery women of Cygni and Flormaseron in a harem, waiting his pleasure.

It was a thought that would have appealed to nine men in ten. Kael McCanahan called himself a fool, but he turned his visions aside.

"I want no conquests, I want no jewels. The only woman I want is Flaith. Where is she?"

THE High Mor sighed. "In a tower, well guarded. No harm has come to her. No harm will come. I am no sadist to harm a woman. Not when what I seek is possessed by a man. Tell me, Terran. What is your price?"

"Peace! Friendship with Terra and the men of Terra. Let the Solar Combine send its traders to Senorech. Peace between the peoples of the stars."

The High Mor laughed. "I too, seek peace. A peace that will end with my dragon banner floating above the towers of New Washington, Terra. With your precious Solar Combine run by the sfarri. I offer you a place in that peace, Kael McCanahan. A high place. The highest place of all! I am a god! I have no need of earthly things. You do.

"Give me your answer, Terran!"

For a moment, the temptation was there. But in that same moment, the McCanahan remembered the blasted *Eclipse*, and the dead Father he loved, and Captain Edmunds, straight and lean in his white Fleet uniform. A memory came to him of Cassy Garson and the kisses she had given him in a drifting galley on the Tigranian Sea. The High Mor was not human. He knew nothing of the loves and lusts, the fears and terrors of human beings. He was as far removed from the Senn and Terrans as man is from the ant.

"I answer—no! You'd blacken Earth with your rays and leave empty ruins. You'd take everything in space! And me—what of me?"

The High Mor smiled. "You would rule the universe!"

But Kael McCanahan shook his head stubbornly. "I cannot believe that. If I once tell you—"

*Beware, Terran!*

The Doyen thought warned him just in time.

The High Mor brought his hand out from under his cloak and he held a black-metal stinger in his fingers. It spat a stream of violent fire at the McCanahan.

Kael dove sideways. The tip of his finger slipped through the violet fire and it stung

with the agony of seared nerve-ends. If full effect of that blast had touched him he would be writhing helplessly on the floor, his body one gigantic mass of pain.

He had seen the stinger turned on unregenerate killers. It softened them in a hurry.

His shoulder hit the edge of the table where the High Mor sat. The table upended, and the High Mor fell to the floor with him.

Kael put a hand to the throat of the other man and his fingers tightened and squeezed. It was like choking a bar of steel. The High Mor forced a laugh through his lips, and his body twisted like an uncoiling spring and forced the McCanahan from him.

"The Doyen warned you. I caught the thought they put in your brain! Well, let them play their game. They can only interfere with me when I use my Doyen powers to destroy you. I have other gifts to use!"

A fist dove at his face, but the McCanahan was a master at rough and tumble fighting. He slipped it and bored in. His fists drummed into the High Mor's belly, lifted and threw him back to rebound off the far wall.

A dozen weapons came tumbling down on the ruler of Senorech. A cloak swathed his flailing arms.

Kael stepped back, waiting.

That was where he made his mistake. For the High Mor slid to the floor in a crumpled heap, and the thing that was Noorlythin glowed and pulsed and moved its frosted tendrils, free of its fallen body.

As Noorlythin moved its tendrils, the floor fell away beneath the booted heels of the McCanahan. The walls of the guard-room went out of existence, and Kael was falling, falling.

*Gird yourself, Terran! You go into sub-space where no other living thing can enter! Not even another Doyen to shield you from my wrath! For each Doyen has in him the seeds of material creation, and what one Doyen materializes, no other Doyen can disturb!*

And the high, mocking laughter followed him down and down, into the eternal blackness where he fell.

## VII

A HOT sun blanketed his naked body. It blazed from a molten sky and cooked him where he lay on warm red rocks. Kael McCanahan lifted his head and stared at the searing desolation before him. Sand and rock, and the shale of evaporated seas, stretching like the finger of Time to infinity itself, outward to that blazing blue bowl of sky where the golden sun hung high, pouring down its heat.

He came to his feet and swayed with the pain that the heat was putting in his muscles.

*Come to me! Come! Come!*

He put trembling hands to his head, and again that sweet call sounded, with the siren lure of all the lost treasures of all space.

He stumbled forward, hearing the summons in his brain, in every fibre of his being.

*Come to my riches! Lift up your hands to the jewel that gives man everything he wants! Touch me! I am yours!*

He was running across the hot sands that bit his naked feet with hot teeth, and over the sharp rocks that cut into his flesh until he bled. Dimly, he knew that nothing could help him now. That here he was cut off from everything that was sane.

This mad world was a creation of Noorlythin. His was the wild brain that dreamed the sands and the rocks and the awful desolation. His dream, that sun that cooked while it shone.

Sobbing, he ran. He fell to his knees, and he crawled.

With bleeding fingers he clawed at the rocks, making himself rise and run again. It seemed to the man that had once been Kael McCanahan that he was running around a planet. The pain was part of him, now. His muscles jerked in agony at every step, yet always he forced himself to run faster, faster, gulping down the hot desert air. That siren call was strong in his ears.

*Run, Terran! Run to me!*

He ran on and on, and now he saw the others, men like himself, running on bleeding feet, crawling when those feet were worn to crached stumps. And before each of those men, or before Kael McCanahan's own eyes, gleamed—

*The eye of Lirflane!*

A globe of a red jewel it was, the eye. Imprisoned in its faceted surface were the dreams of a billion people. The man that looked on it saw the happiness he sought, and he fought to join himself to it, that his own dreams would add to the total of all the others. And on the dreams and on the flesh of these men who came to it, drawn by its siren voice and by the eternity of delight it promised, the eye of Lirflane feasted, waxed and swelled.

A man tried to claw at his legs as Kael McCanahan ran past him. Red eyes in a bloated face hurled hate at him, as his hand closed on his ankle.

The McCanahan shook himself free and ran on.

The eye was closer now.

It grew massive, transparent. In its redness, the redness of the hair of flaming Flaith beckoned. Her white body swayed and danced, and her throaty voice summoned him.

The McCanahan's arms shook as he put them out, trying to pull himself forward with handfuls of hot, desert air.

Now the Eye of Lirflane was before him, and all he could see was Flaith moving toward him, her arms wide and beckoning—

One step he moved, and another.

His hand went out, toward the gleaming red side of the monstrous jewel.

*Come to me, Kael McCanahan! Come to the peace and the forgetfulness you have earned. Take me in your arms. Drink kisses from my lips!*

The McCanahan sobbed.

He shook in torture more vivid than the agony in his feet and muscles.

"Not Flaith!" he cried. "Not Flaith! You—woman of the jewel! Witchwoman of Lirflane! Not Flaith!"

He went to his knees, to anchor himself the better to the ground, against the siren call of the mighty Eye.

"No. Got to fight! Get free. Free . . ."

He fought there on his knees, while men streamed past him, rushing with insane desire into the red heaven of the jewel. Their eyes were mad with the greed or the lust that shook them, for every man saw in the Eye of Lirflane what his own eyes wanted most to see. Their bodies were torn

and gaum from their struggle across the sand and rock desolation. But they would lose their pain, within the bosom of the red eye.

Kael fought. He fought silently, until the sweat came out on his face in big globes, until it runneled down his chest and thighs. His belly and his back were awash with the salt dampness.

At last he turned, just a little, so that only a corner of the fabulous Eye remained in his vision.

An hour later, he turned again, and now he saw only the barren loneliness of this abandoned world. And as he stared, the sand and the rocks and the sky ran with liquid movement as a painting might run in a bath of chemicals. And the streaming reds and buffs and yellows, the black and the greens and purples flowed together and formed a river, that swept the tortured legs of the McCanahan out from under him.

HE SCREAMED in his agony as the salt water bit into his bleeding wounds. He babbled and twisted, flailing the salt sea with animal desperation. He drowned in this vast emptiness of ocean, with no hand to grasp his or eye to witness his going.

"No," he shouted to the gray leaden sky above him. "I won't die! I'll live! I'll live!"

His arms and his legs moved, and clumsily, he swam. No driftwood floated here. Here a man had to swim to stay alive, until his arms and his legs grew numb with his effort, and he sank.

The McCanahan turned on his back, and the salt water buoyed him up. He floated for endless days, and during endless nights, and the tiny spark of life within him waxed and waned. And out of the eternity of no-time, as he swam and alternately floated, a wing-prowed galley slipped through the foam-crested waves. Its white sail bellied in the ocean wind. It veered and came for him, running easily in the water.

From the rail, a bearded face scowled down at him. A hairy hand threw a rope that he twisted around his middle. He was dragged on deck, to stand dripping with the salt water that seared his wounds.

A rope was whipped around his wet wrists and he was dragged to the slim mast that rose from the deck, before the oarbanks

where slaves pulled at smooth-handled oars.

A woman whose flesh was tinted a delicate green came toward him. She walked with quick, supple strides, and the McCanahan noted numbly that her eyes were a feral green, and that her tiny ears were pointed. A whip coiled in her hand.

She showed her tiny teeth in a cruel smile.

"You are the man from Terra! You are the one who turned down all the worlds of space! For that you must be punished!"

And the long lash went snaking out in an arc, slashing into his back, and the sheer agony of the cutting whip slammed his body against the mast. The lash came down and lifted, came down and lifted, and the McCanahan sagged in the ropes that held him.

With the cruelty of her species, the cat-woman flogged him. When she was done, she cut him loose and stood over him on the swaying deck that was stained with his blood. Her voice was soft, furry.

"Take him and chain him to an oar! Rivet the manacles on his wrists and ankles! Let him tug an oar for a year! Then perhaps he will obey Him who is ALL!"

He was kicked and shoved across the deck. He tumbled into an empty slot on an oarbench. His wrists and ankles were shackled, the armorer not caring where his metal mallet fell.

For a day he rested, with black bread soaked in wine forced between his teeth. For a day, he knew only the blessedness of not moving. His slumber was dreamless—

In a red dawn, he was awakened by the bite of an overseer's whip across his bloody back. His hands lifted and went to the oar-handle, and his body swayed and returned, and he put his weight with the weight of the men who held the same oar as he.

The galley slipped through the heaving ocean, and the red oars flashed in the sun, and the salt spray stung, and only when an errant wind swept across the seas was there any rest for the men who slaved on the benches. Sometimes men died, and were flung overboard. Other men were unshackled and dragged screaming to the foredeck, where the cat-woman waited, pink tongue licking her lips, the whip curling like a live thing in her hands.

And of all the men who worked the oars in this endless ocean, it was the McCanahan who was chosen most often for her amusement.

Once he almost died under the biting whip, and in that moment of pain and numbness, when his senses seemed about to float from his body, the cat-woman leaned close and her furry voice whispered, "Speak your secret to me, man of Terra! Tell me the weapon that slays the sfarri!"

But the McCanahan only shook his head and his hair, long uncut, tumbled on his bleeding shoulders.

The days were endless on that ocean, and the oars swung and the sail creaked, flapping overhead, and the overseer tramped the runway with endless patience, his voice a sullen growl. The cat-woman came to look upon the McCanahan and her slim greenish fingers came forth to stroke his naked back where her lash had marred it. Always her throaty voice whispered to him, speaking of the delights that might be found in her cabin, if only he were not so stubborn.

When her patience was at an end, she motioned to the overseer and he came with armed guards and unchained the McCanahan, and he was led to the mast and roped.

And then, in the middle of a whipping, the ocean and the ship and the cat-woman's whip fell away . . .

HE LAY on a hard, cold floor.

The High Mor stood before him, his hard eyes glittering. Kael was back in the guardroom that he had left—how long ago?

"A year," said the High Mor, reading his thought. "A year and five days! And yet, the barest split second of Time. I sent you out to those worlds of subspace, Kael McCanahan. There you lived, and almost died. You rowed at a real oar. You suffered the cuts of a real whip. Look at yourself!"

The High Mor threw a small metal mirror at him. Dazedly he stared at the grim, hard brown face and the cold blue eyes he saw mirrored on its surface. His flesh was brown, and great muscles swelled under it. The oar had put those muscles there, as the whip had put the scars on his ribs and back.

"Only a split second of our time, Terran," said the High Mor. "But a year and five

days in the worlds I made! I told you I had gifts! I have made a thousand million worlds for that subspace, in the eons that I have roamed the stars. I am a god!"

Kael shook his head and his long hair flicked his naked arms. If he needed proof of the High Mor's words, his long-uncut hair was proof enough.

He thought, *Tell him, and let him have his way! How can a man fight a god?* The thought washed over him that he fought for all mankind, that the men and women of a thousand planets unknowingly depended on his fight. Women like the flame-tressed Flaith, men like his father and Captain Edmunds, who did their duty and died for it, all depended on what he did.

He had to think, to go over this logically. What would be the thought processes of a god? A god was no mere mortal, to be judged and weighed by human wants and failings. In it there was no mercy, no thought for anything but itself.

Kael pushed himself away from the floor to stand on long brown legs.

*Courage, man of Terra! He shall not trap you so again!*

The Doyen voice gave him heart, but the High Mor sneered.

"I heard it, too, Terran! The Doyen cannot help you. Not unless I strive by Doyen means to kill you. I need not do that, Kael McCanahan, need I?"

The McCanahan shook his head like a dumb animal. He would never go back to that subspace where Noorlythin was a god in truth! To that hell, where a second was a year, where the Doyen themselves could not enter!

"I could put you there again, Terran. I could forget you, let you live out your life for an eternity of seconds that are years! Would you listen to reason then? Would you like to test your will again against that of the Eye of Lirflane? Or feel once more the lash of Vigrette, the cat-woman? No, I read in your eyes that you would not!

"Come, then. Tell me how you made the sfarri die!"

*Speak, man of Terra! Tell Noorlythin what he seeks! Only then, as he absorbs the knowledge, can we reach him!*

The McCanahan shrugged the great shoulders that were scarred with the lash

above the smooth roll of their bulging muscles. His head hung so that his uncut hair shielded his face.

"The harp," he whispered. "On the harp of Brith Tsinan is a silver string. The d-note! I strung it with a silvern wire that I loosed from my father's wrist!"

And as he spoke, he moved.

As liquid as the falling waters in the Veil of Valmoora was the leap of the McCanahan. Full into the High Mor he hurtled, knocking him sideways. And as they went down together—

The Doyen struck!

The very rocks of the palace misted and swirled under that awesome clutching. White fire flared and seared, and where it touched, all matter was destroyed! The walls of the palace shook and quivered. Beams groaned under the sudden stress.

Where the guardroom had been, was empty nothingness!

In a flame that lapped him protectively as it flared fiercely and strongly at Noorlythin himself, the Doyen carried both men upward. So swift was their transmission through normal space that in one blinding surge of the white flame, the McCanahan found himself between the worlds, in some lost, dark blotch of empty space.

"No Doyen may slay another Doyen!"

That voice rang triumphantly in the abyss.

"There is a way, Noorlythin! That is why we have let you work your will on this man. He hates you with a deadly hate, Noorlythin. You put him in your worlds of sub-space, and you abandoned him to the creatures of your own creation!"

"Aie! I abandoned him! Were it not for him and his harp, I would reign as a god on every planet in all inhabited space. The Solar Combine would have fallen to my sfarran battle fleet!"

"You dared not move before you knew the one weapon that might defeat you!"

"Now I know! Now! Now!"

The radiant energy in the thing that was Noorlythin was awful. It beat and flared redly through the whiteness. The McCanahan shuddered as its heat beat out at him, chilling even as it seared.

*Courage, Terran! Courage for what lies ahead!*

And now the voices shrank and whis-

pered, piping like elfin horns within his head, that none but he could hear.

*Through you, we may destroy him! Courage! With your help, he dies—forever!*

He knew what he had to do. Of his free will he had to offer himself to Noorlythin! Of his free will, he had to fling himself into the mad embrace of those pulsing tendrils, that had turned Lunol the peddler to black and drifting dust!

*He gave you to the Eye of Lirflane! He gave you to the cat-woman and her whip!*

The McCanahan snarled. "Destroy him, and I save the Solar Combine! I hear you, Doyen. I hear and I—obey!"

And Kael McCanahan flung himself headlong, forward into the white whirlwind of force that was Noorlythin.

IN THE Chamber of Living Death, she who had been Slyss of Aakan quivered fitfully. A bubble of froth broke from her red lips. She moaned and stirred. A hand lifted, struggled feebly, fell back to her side, limp and waxen.

Slyss opened brown eyes. She lay silent, staring upward at the ceiling. A sob fought its way upward from her throat.

"Noorlythin is dead! His control over me and the others—gone forever!"

She rolled off the dais and stared around her, at the dead bodies. She shivered. She went to the doors and pulled them open. In the distance, she could hear the frightened roaring of terrified men. She began to run.

Flaith shook the bars of the cell that held her. Her red hair made a living flame about her shoulders.

"What is happening? What is it?" she screamed.

A terrified jailer paused in his heavy run past her cell.

"The palace is falling in! The High Mor is dead. His body has been found!"

Flaith shook the barred door.

"Let me out! Please, please! Give me a chance to save myself!"

The jailer licked his lips. He glanced up and down the corridor, then slid the key into the lock. The door opened under a push from his hand. "If the High Mor is dead," he told the girl, "maybe the sfarri won't stay here on Senorech! Maybe the Senn can rule themselves, now."

Flaith caught the man by his arm.

"The one I was captured with! Kael McCanahan, the Earther! Where is he?"

"Nobody knows! His cell is empty."

"His harp? Man, where is his harp?"

The jailer shook himself free and started down the corridor. Over his shoulder he called, "Look in the storehouse beyond the cell block. We keep all prisoners' effects in there!"

*Terran! Wake to life, Kael McCanahan!*

He was dead. He had thrown himself into the fiery maw of the thing that was Noorlythin. Who called him now? Who spoke these lies?

*You live, Terran. You served as the catalyst that enabled us to focus our powers against Noorlythin.*

Even a high school student knew that a catalyst retained its own identity during the chemical change it brought about between two substances; even such substances as were the Doyen, gods of space.

Kael opened his eyes.

He lay on a floor in the wreckage of the guardroom in the palace of Akkalam. In the distance, but growing closer, he heard the faint strumming of harpstrings. He lay there and listened to the harp, as life flowed

stronger into his body.

The strumming came nearer.

The McCanahan stood up and he waited, big and brown, marked with scars.

Flaith stood in the broken doorway, her fingers falling from the harp. Tears had formed twin channels from her red-lashed eyes along her cheeks. When she saw Kael, she did not know him. And then he grinned, and his long hair and scarred brown body were forgotten.

She flung herself at him, and lay against him, trembling.

He told her of the High Mor and what he had been, and of how the Doyen had destroyed him. "We've won, Flaith. He's dead, forever. With the harp—and the vibrators that we'll build to duplicate its pitch—the Solar Combine will move on Sfar. Smash it, and its robot life!"

Laughter bubbled in her throat as she looked up at him. "They'll reward you, Kael. Make you somebody big on Terra!"

The McCanahan grinned and hugged her.

"An admiral at least! How would you like to be wed to an admiral, Flaith mavourneen?"

Her answer rocked him, in the hunger of her mouth on his.

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# CHICKEN FARM

By ROSS ROCKLYNNE

**J**UST in from a long haul searching for asteroid juncture points, Harvey entered the lobby of the Hotel de Mars and went straight to the registration desk. The woman at the desk, who was blond, and blue-eyed, and inclining to chubbiness, looked at him, smiled. The smile was of such quality that Harvey's singed brown face

set into a mold of utter attention.

Finally he let out his breath.

"I want a room," said he, "on the Deimos side."

He attentively studied the cheerful face while she made out slips, accepted his signature, accepted his money. After he had the key, after he had his change, after

*Harvey was a most unusual little man. A Cosmos-minded man with great singleness of purpose. He could discover asteroid-juncture faults with the greatest of ease, and "perp" planets, too. . . .*

*But could he find Anna from Oregon who doubted his greatest discovery of all?*

everything was taken care of, he still stood there. The woman smiled into his seamed eyes.

"Was there something else?"

Harvey said, noting the emptiness of her chubby ring-finger, "Ma'am, I'm an abrupt, outspoken man. I have no sense of humor. Some people like me; some people don't. I make my living moving around the solar system. I've never been rich, but I never have any trouble making money, as much as I want. Now what was your question again?"

Her fingers slowly caressed a yellow pencil.

Her smile was a little strained. She said cautiously, "I thought you wanted something else. What you want to do is talk, isn't it? You're in from a long space-haul, it's lonely out there, men get so they have to talk to a woman, don't they? So you'd like to take me out to dinner? And take me to a show? And take me up to your room to watch Deimos, which happens to shine only into the windows of your room?"

He looked at her.

"I have no sense of humor," he repeated with great patience. "As you grow to know me, you will understand that. It will be no deterrent to our romance, however; I have other qualities."

"Romance?"

"Yes. What I want is you. I'm an abrupt man. My mind makes itself up quickly. In space, one must learn to make quick decisions. That's what I want. You. We'll discuss this at dinner. Please be ready."

He went up to his room, refusing to let the bell hop touch his scarred suitcase. A little man. A man with great singleness of purpose. The blond woman, who was nice, and blue-eyed, and inclining to chubbiness, looked after him blinking. She took care of the next guest. She thought deeply. She decided to go to dinner with the lost, lonely man from outer space.

They ate in the main dining room of the Hotel de Mars (the 'de' being rather a fancy touch.) He did not talk. He ate. Great quantities of Martian food with strange, exotic names. He ordered straight shots of whiskey afterward. Then he talked.

"Now, we were discussing something of importance at the registration desk, ma'am. What was it?"

"Me."

"Fine. I'm glad you remember."

She burst into laughter, then stifled the laugh in horror.

He shook his brown, leathery head. "Laugh, please. Laugh as much as you please. I have no sense of humor, but I think other people should have the opportunity of exercising theirs. I often say things which are funny to others. As for myself, I never laugh. This you will become accustomed to. I'll order you some champagne. Do you enjoy Terra-Frenault '97?"

"Love it," she said, having never had any. She leaned forward, her eyes sparkling. "I'm enjoying myself so much. Everything is so unorthodox. I was brought up in Oregon, on my father's chicken ranch. The town people were so orthodox. I came to Mars all alone just to get away from people orthodox. Now that I've become unorthodox myself, one of these days I'm going back to Oregon and teach them to be unorthodox. And of course I'll own a chicken ranch."

He gulped whiskey. He looked at her searchingly from steel-colored eyes that had leather seams around them. "You like chickens?"

"Plymouth Rocks," she said. "They're the most beautiful bird alive. I'll raise Plymouth Rocks."

"Fine," he said. "I'm glad to know this. However, drop the idea of going back to Oregon. We'll be heading for the outer spaces, ma'am."

"Is this why I'm having dinner with you?"

"YES. To let you know my intentions." He called for the check. "I'm forty years old, ma'am. The time has come to make a permanent home for myself, with a wife and children. For several days I've toyed with the idea of falling in love with someone. What's your astrological sign?"

"Taurus." She looked at him over the champagne, her face wide with a smile that had an almost irrepressible giggle behind it.

"Fine, fine." He threw money on the table and got up. "I'm Pisces. Pisces and Taurus get along very well. This is the reason I fell in love with you, ma'am. What was your name?"

"I want to finish my champagne," she protested, not getting up. "My name is Anna Christina Morley."

He sat down. "Forgive me. I'm an abrupt man. I do things and then they're over. I never linger. As you grow to know me, this will become apparent. But finish your champagne. My kind of woman always speaks her mind. So your name is Anna Christina Morley. A very unusual name. A numerological breakdown would no doubt show you to be a strong, a firm, an idealistic woman. I am a fortunate man. Have you finished your champagne?"

"I guess so," she sighed. She got up and took her cape that had the twinkling little bells on it, and that changed color every five minutes on the second, and that told time. "Where are we going?"

"I'll take you back to your room," he said, "and say good night."

She was beautiful in the overhead sparkling lights of the dining room. Something caught her sharply in the solar plexus as he spoke.

"Why?" she said forlornly.

His singed eyebrows came up. "Why? My purpose is accomplished. You know my intentions. Now I must go out and prepare. I'll be leaving for outer space within the hour. I'll be back in ten months."

He took her to the door of her room. "Good night, Anna," he said.

She stopped him. Her heart was beating too hard. There was in her a sharp emptiness, a terrific sense of frustration. "Kiss me," she said wearily. "You said you were in love with me, so we might as well get

that much acquainted."

"I am in love with you," he said. He immediately took her into his arms, kissing her long and hard. Then he released her, looking strangely into her eyes. "Anna," he said, "I *shall* be back in ten months. I know you'll be here." He went down the stairs. She went into her room. She sat on the edge of the bed. Then she threw herself on the bed and cried, hard, angry sobs. Why had she allowed him to ruin what could have been such a splendid evening? She kicked her shoes off. They hit the wall with two walloping thumps. She lay on her back and laughed at the ceiling with tears coming out of her eyes. What an evening. An evening as strange, as abortive, as cruel as the man who had cut it off so suddenly.

Her eyes snapped open then. She felt something happen inside her, a longing as wide and deep as black space. "Oh no," she said in a tone that was low and explosive. She slowly turned on her side, sniffing.

She couldn't help it. He was nothing, but he was incredible. Ten months. . . .

FOR years the Asteroid Association had offered a flat rate of one thousand credits to anybody who gave them the location of genuine asteroid-juncture faults. They were engaged in a strictly scientific and commercially useless attempt to show that the asteroids once comprised a large planet between Mars and Jupiter. They needed evidences of lines of fracture showing where two separated asteroids once had been joined; the complete picture would finally give them a complete planet. Harvey had found fifteen such points. The money gave him leeway to pursue other activities. Forty million miles above the plane of the ecliptic moved his small ship.

He was not looking for juncture points now. He was looking for a particular kind of planet, one, moreover, which had never been discovered before. Therefore he was hunting for a "perp" planet.

He searched two months. That most celestial bodies within the Solar System already had been discovered did not deter him. He found his planet and came to a landing. He got into his pressure suit, lugging his gravitic equipment with him. He immediately started taking readings.

The gravity was shallow, less than one-tenth of a gee. Far too little. There was no atmosphere. The ground was frozen, but upon submitting it to flame it gave off the lines characteristic of phosphorus, nitrogen, hydrogen. That pleased him. He made other readings, then he went into his ship and wrote in his diary:

There are many drawbacks. The planet is only 483 miles in diameter. It, at present, has no atmosphere. Being frozen, it will have to be thawed. Obviously, it cannot, at present, support Plymouth Rock chickens, much less human beings. I must now determine velocity, orbit, year, and day.

A month later he wrote in his diary:

Money will be needed. Much more than can be supplied by discovering juncture faults. Plymouth Rock chickens need worms; worms perhaps need Plymouth Rock chickens. One finds it necessary to grow corn also. Gravity lugs must be installed deep in the ground. Gravity lugs are expensive. An interesting fact is that in four weeks this planet will intersect the plane of the ecliptic. Something can be done with this information.

Harvey determined the major and minor apices of the "perp" planet. He determined its point of intersection with the plane of the ecliptic. Then he went to the planet Earth, and came into a sleek landing at the New York spaceport. He went to the information window, asking for and receiving the time-schedules of all lines sending freight or passenger ships between the planets. He studied them for a week in his hotel room. He went back to the information desk to confirm his findings.

The clerk was most helpful. Yes, the liner *Hermes* of the firm of Gramenger & Lewis would leave Venus at 7:17 Solar Standard time on a Wednesday three weeks from now bound for Titan of Saturn. The space coordinates Harvey had figured out were correct. Yes, the shipping firm of Gramenger & Lewis would not dare change the trajectory or the schedule on as little as three weeks notice. To do so would involve loss of prestige as well as of millions of dollars in contracts and passenger fees. Harvey thanked him and went to the Claims Registration Office on Luna.

"I wish," he told the official, "to register prior discovery and ownership of a planet whose orbit lies perpendicular to the plane of the ecliptic."

The official doubted very much that any

"perp" planets remained to be discovered, telling Harvey they were useless anyway. Harvey did not laugh.

THE official spent an hour poring over catalogues, showing increasing amazement. Finally he said, "You're in luck!"

At the end of an hour he had found Harvey's planet in numerous photographs, and had taken readings on the orbit which exactly coincided with Harvey's figures. He made out the necessary papers. Now Harvey owned a planet.

Harvey said, "I'm an abrupt man, sir. I speak my mind. I have no sense of humor, as you must realize by now. I want a tankful of fuel on credit."

The official shook his head. "I can't do it. I have no authority to give credit. This is the United States government you're talking to." He laughed.

Harvey did not laugh. "I am asking for personal credit."

"On what security?"

Harvey thought. "On no security. I am an honest man. My word is good enough. However, there will be a bonus when the loan is returned. Before Thanksgiving you will be in receipt of one dozen succulent, tender, meaty Plymouth Rock chickens as large as turkeys. May I ask what your astrological sign is?"

The official leaned back staring, and making a soundless whistle. He couldn't laugh. This man had no sense of humor. "He said, 'Well, I was born August 26—'"

"Fine, fine. A Virgo. You and I can do business, sir. Pisces and Virgo get along. I shall be leaving at 5:00 SST. I shall leave my vessel in your care. Good evening." He slept untroubled at the hotel connected with the Claims Office, and in the morning took off. The meter reading, which he did not even trouble to inspect, read Full.

He went to Venus, taking two weeks to get there. On the way he passed his planet which he was naming Plymouth, but did not trouble to open the port to look at it. Not much could have occurred to misplace it. On Venus, he docked his ship at the central spaceport, and went by tube to Venus Port. Five minutes after getting there he was talking to the secretary in the outer office of the firm of Gramenger

& Lewis. At first the secretary did not want to admit him to see Mr. Gramenger, but Harvey said:

"May I have your name, please?"

She gave it. He sat down with pencil and paper, and after five minutes looked up with a pleased smile. "Numerologically," he said, "we find a coincidence here. We are both 22's. This is an exceptionally strong number, denoting trust, idealism, and self-mastery. What is your astrological sign?"

"Pisces."

"Pisces! I, too, am a Pisces."

She gave him a look. "Pisces people are not noted for their diplomacy, or for subtlety. You're under the wrong sign."

He frowned. "This I do not understand."

She smiled. "Never mind. You can see Mr. Gramenger in about five minutes."

"Thank you. Perhaps we can share dinner this evening."

"Well—"

"I have no money, you understand."

Her mouth fell open. She burst into laughter, and then clapped her hand over her mouth when she saw he was dead serious. She said quickly, "All right. I'll take you to dinner. I guess we poor fish have to stick together."

"Thank you," he said. "We can go to the Milo Club. In return for the favor, I can promise you that before Thanksgiving you will receive three large Plymouth Rock chickens of unusual tenderness and flavor." He picked up a magazine and read while waiting.

Gramenger, when he saw Harvey, leaned back in his chair scrubbing a meaty chin. He remarked he was pleased to meet Harvey, but he couldn't place the name, and did not understand how Harvey had got into the office without a prior appointment. Harvey said these details did not matter, but that what did matter was that he was here to make a financial settlement with the firm rather than, later on, to bring suit against the firm for a sum of one million dollars.

Gramenger's eyebrows went up. He smiled faintly, letting his glance rove over Harvey's stained leather space jacket and spotted denims.

"I'm sure I'd like to hear your story," he said. "I may as well inform you, how-

ever, that any claims against the company must be laid before the legal department."

Harvey stood at the desk looking down.

"I'm an abrupt man, sir," he said. "I do things quickly, and then they're over. I have no liking for red tape or legal maneuvers. If my business is not settled before I leave this office within the next hour, you may expect to go to court and lose much more than the meager damages settlement I am asking."

"Damages for what?" Gramenger frowned irritably. His chair came down with a bang. "If you think you can pull a fast one with the firm of Gramenger & Lewis—"

Harvey broke in. He told Gramenger about his planet Plymouth. He showed his papers of ownership. He described the orbit. He showed where the planet would intersect the plane of the ecliptic in one week, seven hours, twenty-eight minutes, and some seconds. He showed the official seal from the Claims Office proving that this was so.

"Your liner *Hermes*," he said, will intersect the orbit of the planet Plymouth some 17,000 miles from Plymouth. The atomic wash from the *Hermes'* drivers will infect space for 100,000 miles around; this is standard knowledge and has been proved in court. Legal precedent has also established that nucleonic, gravitonic, or positronic infection of planetary farmlands constitutes a serious misdemeanor for which damages, both punitive and otherwise, may be sought."

Gramenger grinned. "Let me see those papers." He looked them over, chuckling. Once he looked up.

"PLANETARY farmlands, huh? And this planet is a hunk of rock out in space. Frozen. Only 483 miles in diameter. No atmosphere." He scooped up the inter-office 'phone. "Phil!" he said. "Get up here. I want you to prove something to a loco joking yokel I've got up here in the office." He hung up. "That's my lawyer," he said, leaning back and folding his hands over his capacious stomach. "Too bad. Maybe you'll learn a lesson from this."

"May I ask what your birthday is?" Harvey asked.

Gramenger told him. Harvey's jaw came

out. "Cancer. Yes, I can see we will have to fight this out."

The lawyer came in. He smiled a little when Gramenger explained. He looked at the papers. He shook a sleek head. He handed the papers to Harvey.

"You don't stand a chance, man. Have you looked into the definition of what constitutes planetary farmlands?"

"What is the definition?" said Harvey.

"Planetary farmlands, legally and simply, are the natural surface or portions of the surface of a planet of any size which could support vegetative growths of any kind. Your mistake here is that this planetoid, and every other such a body that has been discovered, *does not have a soil surface*. Ergo, it cannot support plant life."

"If it *did* have a soil surface," Harvey said.

The lawyer looked at him whimsically. "It couldn't," he said, in what was meant as a kindly tone. "These odd-sized bodies that wander through space have invariably been discovered to be crystallized, meteoric, inorganic materials from top bottom."

"But if it *did* have soil, natural, original surface soil."

The lawyer spread his hands, shrugging. "It can't be. But if it were, naturally, the company would—"

"Change the *Hermes'* trajectory?" Harvey said.

Gramenger glared. "Gramenger & Lewis has changed neither a schedule nor a trajectory in its career as the oldest shipping concern in the Solar System," he snapped.

"Well," said Harvey, "what *would* you do if it were proved that Plymouth has a natural soil surface?" He took a flat paper bag out of his pocket and emptied a pile of dirt onto Gramenger's desk.

The lawyer and Gramenger looked at the pile of dirt. Both men grew a little pale.

The lawyer licked his lips. "If you show that that dirt comes from Plymouth," he said, "Gramenger & Lewis will stand the expense of transforming the planetoid into a free-mover."

"This means," said Harvey, "that you would be forced to install gravitic machinery under Plymouth's surface, including plus and minus grids and controls that would make it possible to move the planetoid out

of the *Hermes'* way."

"Yes. . . ."

"You would also install atmosphere-making machinery."

"If the claimant asked for it, it would be a simple matter."

"You would also provide a transmutator as an adjunct to the atmosphere-machine so that water could be provided?"

Gramenger was being very silent and small behind the desk. Unconsciously, he nodded his head. The lawyer, his amiable manner somewhat shattered, nodded slowly. "These and other things could be done and would be done in a hurry."

"Also," persisted Harvey, "there would be an inconsequential cash settlement of perhaps ten thousand code credits?"

The lawyer was silent. He looked at Gramenger. Gramenger said slowly, "That is a small matter, and would be agreed to. But there is a large matter, and that is to prove that this soil comes from Plymouth. For my money, it's still a hunk of rock—"

Harvey stopped him. He explained briefly his experience in discovering asteroid juncture faults for the Asteroid Association. He explained that once, according to theory and great evidence, a large planet existed between Mars and Jupiter. The planet exploded, forming the asteroid belt, and throwing out large, errant chunks of itself which moved in various peculiar orbits about the Sun.

"Plymouth is such a chunk, and," added Harvey complacently, "I will undoubtedly be paid one thousand credits from the Asteroid Association later on when I show that Plymouth comes from that shattered planet's surface. And I will prove also, for the first time, that that shattered planet contained a surface soil on which vegetable life was rampant. Plymouth is such a proof."

Gramenger writhed and sweated. He pointed to the pile of dirt. "But you haven't proved—"

Harvey turned to the lawyer. "May I ask your astrological sign, sir?"

The lawyer grimaced. "Why? I don't believe in astrology. I have been told it's Taurus."

Harvey smiled. "This is a fine coincidence. My fiancée's sign is also Taurus. I am Pisces. The two signs are especially in affinity with

one another. I believe you can trust me, sir." He looked straight into the lawyer's eyes.

THE lawyer grinned lopsidedly after a moment and turned to Gramenger.

"We can trust him," he said. "He's right all the way down the line. Anyway, we couldn't waste time in finding out."

"All right!" Gramenger rapped the words out half-angrily. "Take care of it, Phil. Get Parsons & Carey on the 'phone, and ask them to send all their engineers and equipment out. Pronto!" The lawyer nodded briefly at Harvey and left the room.

"As for you," said Gramenger. He gulped and stopped. With trembling fingers he began shoving the pile of dirt back into the paper bag. Harvey thought a minute.

"I wonder if I could use your 'phone?" he asked.

Gramenger growled an assent. Harvey sat on the edge of the desk. "Get me outside," he told the operator, who turned out to be a machine somewhere in the building. The mechanical voice told him to press the O key. He pressed the O key. "Get me Mars," he said. The mechanical voice changed to a human voice. "Get me the Hotel de Mars on Mars," he said. Gramenger was staring at him. A voice at the other end came through thinly. "Let me speak to Anna Christina Morley at the Registration desk," he said. Gramenger sat down, beginning to smile and staring at Harvey as if not only a new planet but a new type man had been discovered.

Harvey said, "Anna, dearest? I shall speak very plainly, very quickly. I am a man of few words—What?"

His leathery face lost a little color. "But you are my fiancee, you know."

"Am I?" she cried. "What makes you think so? What makes you think you can talk fifteen minutes with a girl, have her fall in love with you, assume she'll go crazy waiting for you, waiting ten months—when four months have already passed without hearing from you—"

"My dear Anna," he said. "If this is a joke—"

"You're a joke." She sobbed. She broke down. "I don't know what you did to me. Only fifteen minutes. How could you have done that to me in fifteen minutes?"

He frowned. "I'm always certain of a situation before I leave it," he explained.

"That is a common precaution that we men of space must take, an ordinary survival mechanism, I should say. Besides, you are a Taurus, and I am a Pisces and I computed that numerologically—"

"Bother your astrology and your numerology," she snapped.

There was silence, a long half minute of it stretching between Venus and Mars at a half-credit a second. Gramenger continued to get more and more amused.

"What do you want?" she asked. "When will you come back, if ever?"

His singed eyebrow went up in puzzlement. "I told you ten months, Anna. I meant ten months. As for what I want, please, at once, send a space-wire to your father in Oregon. Have him ship five hens and a cock by fast passenger express to the spaceport depot on Venus. Ask him also to include whatever special medicines, feeds, and instructions are necessary for the raising and nurturing of Plymouth Rocks—"

She gasped. "For heaven's sake, why?"

"Don't you want a chicken farm? I am building one on a planet I own."

A groan came over the 'phone, lasting long enough to cost Gramenger & Lewis a credit and a half.

"Dad won't send them. I know. It's hare brained. No one's ever tried to raise chickens any place except on Earth."

"That isn't the point," he said. "Send the wire."

"All right," she said in a small voice.

"Furthermore," he added, "inform your father this is a business venture. I shall keep him supplied, as middleman, with a new breed of Plymouth Rocks which are considerably larger than turkeys, are more succulent, more tasty and tender, lay larger eggs with possibly larger yolks—"

"How?"

"I have some knowledge of biology and pressure chemistry, Anna. Plymouth will be ideal."

"What's Plymouth?"

"The name of the planet."

Harvey cocked his ear at the silence. Then there were sounds of sniffles. "I have to take care of a registration, Harvey," Anna said. "I have to go. I'm very proud that



you love me, Harvey. I'll wait for you. And I'll convince Dad. Goodbye."

"Goodbye," said Harvey. He hung up. "She misses me," he told Gramenger. "Poor girl. Would you like me to take the ten thousand credits in cash or as a check?"

"A check," said Gramenger. He wrote it out. Harvey took it, and started toward the door. He called back:

"Thanks for the use of your 'phone," and walked out. Gramenger had nothing to say.

HARVEY went back to Plymouth some two weeks later. He now owned a much larger ship. It was crammed to the brim with chemical fertilizers to improve the soil. There were also seed grains such as oats, wheat and corn. There was lumber for building, plumbing fixtures, windows, doors, everything needed to build several sheds plus a long, low rambling ranch-type house. The hens and the cock were aboard. There were six men also who would do the building, and help in any other way necessary.

Plymouth was a beautiful, emerald planet as they hove in close to it. As they landed, a pleasant, sunny atmosphere swirled around the ship. The gravitic machinery kept the gravity at Earth normal. The ground was already thawed, and was surprisingly like the rich, life-filled loam found in Iowa cow country. An engineer was waiting for Harvey, showed him the gravitic controls, explained the planet had been moved a million miles out of its orbit so that the *Hermes* could plow past without harming it.

By shutting off gravitic energy from one side, he explained, pressing buttons on the control panel, the planet could be made to move in any direction.

Furthermore, the gravitation could be raised or lowered at will, on all of the planetoid or on any small portion of it.

"Fine, fine," said Harvey, much pleased. Before the engineer took off Harvey promised him several large Plymouth Rocks before Thanksgiving, and as an afterthought took a numerological reading on his name. Then he instantly started in to work.

The house went up. Saws whined. Sheds went up. Hammers hammered. Lawns were laid, ground fertilized, worm-eggs installed.

Some natural vegetation of a weird nature appeared, its seeds having been alive but frozen for a time measured in epochs. No doubt of it, the soil was alive. The fowl flourished in their fenced in yard, prone to no diseases, having no natural enemies, neither mice nor lice.

Harvey worked with three generations of chickens. He made his experiments with fluctuating gravity under the chicken house.

His employees were fascinated. Harvey explained, "I'm actually 50 years old," he said. "Don't tell my fiancée. She thinks I'm 40. But being out in space, virtually with no gravitational pull on my body for almost all of my life, my life expectancy has been pushed up to somewhere in the hundreds. I can pass for forty.

"Gravity," he said, "makes people grow old and probably hastens death. The muscles have to fight gravity, so do all the other organs. The muscles toughen, get stringy, the skin, the nerves, the arteries and the meat of the body get brittle and hard. This is what is known as 'old age.'

"Think what effect a lowered or fluctuating gravity could have on these beautiful gray white birds."

Harvey experimented a great deal as the weeks passed. He often adjusted the gravity lugs down to a point where they exerted just enough force to hold the atmosphere to the planet. The results were remarkable on the Plymouths.

The third generation of fowl were distinctly a fifth larger than their ancestors. The cocks, which normally should weigh 10 lbs., now weighed between 10 and 14. The hens in proportion kept a couple of pounds under this; they matured faster, they bred much more vigorously than any Plymouth Rock ever had. The eggs were consistently larger.

Harvey early decided against hatching incubators because the hens, untroubled by vermin or other influences such as bad weather which could make them neurotic, paid tranquil attention to their jobs. He did, however, have open electric brooders constantly going so that the chicks could go to them for warmth if necessary.

Lowering the gravity had a similar effect on his corn, oats and wheat crops. They sprang up, maturing in a remarkably short

time. There was plenty of feed for the fowl. Plymouth was rapidly becoming self-supporting.

Harvey was pleased. He explained again: "Pressure can be considered as a gravitational effect, and vice versa. Pressure chemistry causes certain chemical reactions to speed up others to slow down. I figure that by Thanksgiving I can find the correct variation of gravitational pressure that will give me a breed of Plymouth Rocks never seen in this universe."

BY THE time the fourth swift generation came along he had almost reached his goal. Furthermore, the flesh was tenderer than any of these men had thought possible. When the time came for Harvey to take them back to Venus, he promised them they would be well supplied by the time Thanksgiving rolled around.

Harvey was somewhat loath to leave the planet Plymouth alone. He had a certain fear in the back of his head that things would happen if he did. He intended to return as soon as he and Anna got married.

He showed up at the Hotel de Mars a week ahead of time. At Anna's place behind the Registration desk stood a white haired little old lady.

A chill started deep in his stomach when she told him Anna left a month—no, two months ago. She produced a letter Anna had left him. It was brief and pointed.

"Harvey," the letter read, "I know you lied to me. There isn't any planet called Plymouth. I looked it up in the star atlases. Nobody ever heard of it. I'm not going to stay here and be bitterly disappointed when you don't show up at the end of ten months. Goodbye."

Harvey threw the letter away. It had served its purpose.

"Ma'am," he said, "I'm a man of action and few words. What is Miss Morley's Oregon address?"

Nobody knew Anna's Oregon address. Harvey instantly left for Oregon. Landing there, he began looking. He had found juncture faults; he would find Anna. It took him over a month. He ran across her quite by accident behind the cigar counter in a drugstore.

"Anna," he said, "there's no time to lose; get your things; quit this job; come with me." He stopped anything she had to say. They were married in the next hour. An hour after that they were on the way to the planet whose existence Anna still doubted.

There was little room for doubt when that spot of entrancing green in an ocean of black was sighted. "It's beautiful," Anna breathed, squeezing his hand. "But what's the rush to get here?"

He explained without rancor. "Your lack of faith in me cost us far too much time. This is a new breed of chicken; they propagate vigorously. But they have no natural enemies. Every living thing needs a natural enemy. Our Plymouths have probably overrun the planet."

She gurgled, then put her hand over her mouth.

He took her hand away. "Anna, dearest, laugh. Laugh as much as you please. But I have no sense of humor. This you will discover as we move through life together. I see nothing funny in this situation. Living creatures need natural enemies."

When the ship landed, his meaning became obvious. Chickens flew in great squawking clouds through the air, walked and clucked in rivers at their feet. Feathers came down like heavy snow; the ground was covered with fluffy white mounds. From horizon to horizon there seemed to be little else but chicken.

Anna was appalled. Harvey was planning. A slaughter would be necessary. "We're their natural enemies," he explained. "Your chicken farm is ready to pay off."



# RICARDO'S VIRUS

By WILLIAM TENN

*'A knife wound can be a serious matter on Earth. On Venus, it's a six-hour flow into vilest eternity.*

**G**RAFF DINGLE stolidly watched yellow mold form around the stiletto hole in his arm. He smelled the first faint jasmine odor of the disease and glanced up to where the sun glowed unhappily behind a mass of dirty clouds and wind-driven rain.

Dingle kicked morosely at the Heat-wave thug left behind to ambush him, and the charred body turned soughingly in the mud. "Be seeing you, bully-boy, in about five and a half hours. Your electroblast may have missed me, but it cooked my antiseptic

pouch into soup. It made that last knife-thrust really rate."

There was a dumb dryhorn blunder, Graff reflected, sneering at himself out of a face that was dark from life-long exposure to a huge sun. Bending over an enemy before making certain he was burned to a crisp.

But he'd had to search the man's clothing for a clue to the disappearance of Greta and Dr. Bergenson and—even above Greta—the unspeakably precious cargo of lobodin they'd been flying in from Earth.

*So I'll pay for my hurry,* he thought.

*Like one always does in the Venusian jungle.*

Ricardo's Virus was viciously prompt: six hours after its light, saffron globules had formed in an open wound you were dead. And no frantic surgery, no pathetic attempts at drainage, could save you. Graff should know. His parents, his brothers and sisters had been a small fraction of the New Kalamazoo death totals due to cuts and scratches observed too late for antisepsis. The virus had accounted for most of three generations of Venusian colonists, including Vilfredo Ricardo himself, the first man to set hesitant foot on the swampy planet. Ricardo had merely skinned his hand on his new flagpole.

Nasty to die of the filthy mold before he knew what had happened to the Bergensons. Not that he had a personal interest in the matter any more for Greta wouldn't be marrying a corpse when she could pick any one of a hundred extremely live and woman-hungry pioneers. But her father was the only doctor in the tiny settlement. And the loss of the lobodin meant Ricardo's Virus would tuck many more New Kalamazoo colonists into seepy graves before the year was out.

A speck grew large in the sky. Graff involuntarily moved into the shade of a giant rosebush as his oversharpest instincts asserted themselves.

Yes, it was a terry all right. Friendly?

THE pterodactyl landed lightly on a frond of the opposite fern. Its absurd, leathery forehead wrinkled at him. Graff noted that it was barely out of range of his electroblast. Intelligent, sure enough, and an unusually fearless specimen to perch this close to man.

At any other time he would have been intrigued by the opportunity of making friends with one of the intelligent winged reptiles who had learned to speak man's languages and, with good reason, shun his works. Now, he had other things on his mind.

Like dying painfully in a few hours.

Graff looked up sharply as enormous bat-like wings ceased their rustle.

The lizard-bird's long, sloping forehead wrinkled even further. Its beak opened and closed several times. It cleared its throat.

"City?"

Then it was civilized, too. What had induced it to leave its communal eyrie in the San Mountains? The terries had avoided men for over fifty years. Many was the time that Graff, intent on stalking meat for the colonists, had been startled by a flock of pterodactyls winging overhead and shouting curses down at him in the three languages of the early settlers.

"City?" the question was repeated more insistently. "Heatwave or New Kalamazoo?"

"New Kalamazoo."

A relieved nod of the triangular head. "This I thought. You wish knowledge which Heatwave man has man and girl from shif?"

Graff's whole body tensed. "Yes! Do you know?"

Another nod. "This I know. Name is Fuvina."

"Fuvina?" The hunter repeated it with a frown. He knew the names of most of Heatwave's big shots; some were political criminals, escaped from Earth. Others were former residents of his own town who had left in search of an easier living than the continual struggle with marshy soil and carnivorous jungle.

But he couldn't recall any Fuvina. Possibly a new arrival; possibly one of the smaller fry who had recently killed and looted his way to the top of bloody Heatwave society. Fuvina? Fuv—

Of course! The not-quite-flexible pterodactyl beak was incapable of labial sounds like *p* and *b*, and transformed them into the labiodentals *f* and *v*. Pubina! Max Pubina had left New Kalamazoo in a hurry three years ago after cutting some farmer's throat in a boundary dispute and, by combining organized raids on isolated families with the smuggling of the illicit Venusian dunging drug to Earth, had become a power of sorts.

"You mean Pubina?"

"This I said. Fuvina. He and other Heatwave men took man and girl from shif and placed them in own shif. Also took vig green vottle. Left one Heatwave man hidden here. Then flew that way in own shif. A fantastically large and fleshy wing gestured south. "Them I follow. Where Heatwave men stof, I sec. Then I come vack."

The terry drew an immense swallow of

air to compensate for his long speech and shook himself. The great fern trembled in sympathy.

GRAFF stepped forward from the rosebush and inspected his informant closely. "Thanks. But I don't see why you're interested."

The toothed beak, which was half as long as a man, opened uncertainly. "Vecause," the lizard-bird explained in a low voice, "Heatwave men have captured my mate vefore attacking New Kalamazoo sky-shif. In cage they fut her for shivment to Earth. This I can do nothing about fy myself. Vut them I follow, hofing to find way to rescue her."

"And you figure that if you help me find my friends, I'll help you save your mate from the sideshows on Earth? Well, I will, if—"

A big, complex *if*, with as many tendrils as sucking ivy. If he lived long enough, and, if he did, if he would be sane enough—considering the agonizing last hour of Ricardo's Virus infection—to do anything constructive once he arrived at Pubina's jungle hideout. If a man, guided by a pterodactyl flying overhead, could pick his way on foot through a completely unexplored section of swamp and have enough juice left in him when he emerged to take the prize of the century away from the toughest collection of cutthroats on an extremely tough planet.

He clenched his fist as the cramps began in his left hand—the cramps that would spread slowly throughout his body until they ended in fatal convulsions some five hours from now. If a one-armed man could do all this, and do it with just one portable electroblast . . .

He cursed sharply, suddenly, as he realized he'd been holding the electroblast in his hand ever since he'd given the Heatwave thug that finishing jolt. That was after he'd been stabbed, after the man's first wild blast had burned Graff's antiseptic pouch into a mess of fused glass vials and blackened fabric. Without immediate application of the ten different antiseptic solutions.

But now! He inspected the bright metal of the coils anxiously. Might still do. Just might. He holstered the blaster with infinite

tenderness and stooped over the blackened body that had almost disappeared into the mud. The man's electric gun was far too wet to be of any use but Graff fumbled around in the soggy soil until he located the stiletto.

He straightened and grinned at the long blade, its steel already reddening from the pervasive rust of Venus.

"Where is the ship?" he asked. "The ship my friends were in?"

The terry nodded at a flat and soggy expanse. "Under there. Heatwave sky-shif wait here high uf. When New Kalamazoo shif come, Heatwave shif fly down fast ufon it. New Kalamazoo shif hit mud hard. This I see. Then Heatwave men take your friends away and New Kalamazoo shif sink in mud. Altogether are four Heatwave men, vesides Fuvina. You kill one, so now are only three, vesides Fuvina." The flying reptile breathed heavily again. Its scaly claws moved restlessly about on the branch.

*Call that a break*, Graff decided. Four men to handle. Might have been twenty. Either Pubina had a smaller gang than had been believed, or he was playing the whole thing really smart. Toughs, especially Venusian ones, would really chop each other to merry hell over the first laboratory sample of a vaccine that promised immunity from Ricardo's Virus. A break to balance the loss of the ship.

Or was it? All he had was the terry's word. Could be that the entire yarn about his mate being captured for export to the terran amusement parks was nothing more than a story made up by Pubina to play on a colonist's sympathy. The terry might be working for Pubina some way or other. Who knew anything about pterodactyls? Who knew if they experienced anything like love or loyalty?

Graff stared at the unwinking reptilian eyes, at the tapering ugly beak, both completely devoid of expression. Add another *if*.

"All right, MacDuff," he said at last. "Lead on."

"We go in vig curve," the terry told him, flapping its wings monstrously in preparation for flight. "Eight, nine hours for you. Other way take half time, vut—"

"Vut nothing!" Graff broke in. He mas-

saged his left forearm, which had begun aching in sympathy with the hand. "Let's use the short cut."

"It too hard for you, too dangerous! River cuts across—"

"So I'll get my feet wet. I'm not in a position to be worried by pneumonia. Let's head for the straight and narrow, MacDuff. I'm in a hurry."

THE animal cocked its head to one side, dropped its wings in a gesture like a shrug and moved off the fern in a soaring glide southward. When it was about three hundred feet up, it circled back to make certain that Graff was following.

Now if you ever go to Venus, the Polar Continent is probably where you'll live for the duration of your stay. Not only is its temperature and annual rainfall the lowest on the planet (which makes it just a shade more uncomfortable than the Amazonian Jungle), but also it is the most heavily populated stretch of land—averaging close to one person every thirty square miles.

But if you find yourself on the Polar Continent you will be advised, and well-advised, to stay away from the Southern Peninsula. This is not merely because it is a dank and deadly swamp. But chiefly because of the Black River which winds through the peninsula, doubling back on itself, crossing through itself and becoming a tributary of itself a dozen times over, like a living surrealist corkscrew.

The Black River rises somewhere in the unscalable peaks of the San Mountains and comes roaring into the flatlands with a tremendous velocity. Just before reaching the peninsula, however, it is joined by the Zetzot River, and the two of them make a combination that is really in a hurry. Even if there were no rain at all (which is definitely not the case!), there would be a perpetual mist over the Southern Peninsula. And by the time the Black gets through doubling back on itself, giving itself a shove, so to speak—well, the reason no one knows exactly where the river empties into the Jefferson Sea is because the entire area is completely obscured by an opaque steaming fog which boils about for miles on either side.

Not is that all. Certain animals like to

wallow in the swamp created by the Black. And most of them are very large. Creatures which can survive in the swamp of the Southern Peninsula are quite tough, quite dangerous and most uniquely suited to their environment. There are snakes and insects and carnivorous plants galore, not to mention the huge creatures who live in quicksand and have yet to be classified. One of the smallest animals of the peninsula is a dark little fish which swims back and forth in the Black itself. Venusian colonists have christened it the sardine, possibly because it is the size of a terrestrial sardine. Its habits, however, resemble those of the South American piranha. It travels in large schools and eats its way through anything.

All in all, the Southern Peninsular Swamp is an ideal home for a baron of crime who wants to get away from it all. The *all* doesn't include law, of course. On Venus, each man writes his own code of laws with the weapon he finds handiest.

The trouble was, Graff Dingle reflected, as he found a ford and leaped across the screaming waters to the opposite bank, the trouble was that his folks and people like them had come to Venus to get away from lawlessness of the international kind only to hit the inevitable individual lawlessness of a frontier.

Ordinarily a frontier is slowly and surely transformed from rowdy wide-openness into suburban quietude by the increase in population—but population doesn't increase in really dangerous spots; that's why the people of New Kalamazoo worked so hard and so long to make their settlement large enough to merit the establishment of a university. A university would mean laboratories and research facilities to investigate Ricardo's Virus and all the lesser plagues peculiar to Venus, the plagues which took more lives yearly than jungle monsters and murderous Heatwavers combined; and a university would mean an increase in population, and law and order.

But Earth hadn't been interested. The study of Venusian diseases was an exotic subject hardly touched upon in Terran medical schools. Earth had been far too busy manufacturing artificial diseases to supplement atom bombs and hydrogen bombs.

Earth had, however, investigated the Venusian plagues with a view to their use in biological warfare. And out of the investigation, as an accident, as a by-product, had come lobodin. A vaccine, not a serum. No good for Graff right now, for he was almost two full hours into the yellow death.

HE WORKED his left arm around slowly, wincing with each turn, his eyes on the terry above him circling southward in the damp murky sky. At the same time he tried to plant the broad soles of his boots on mud that wasn't quicksand, on rotten twigs that wouldn't crack too loudly. He knew his blood was now completely infiltrated with the obscene little yellow specks.

Pubina was probably trying to force Dr. Bergenson to inject the vaccine into him, ridiculing the old man's protests that all the bottle held was a starter culture, just enough so that with weeks of careful tending they might have sufficient vaccine to immunize the children.

It had been so expensive and difficult for the little colony to send Dr. Bergenson and Greta to Earth where his reputation and connections had enabled him to wheedle a spoonful of the precious stuff out of a government laboratory! Pubina hadn't been able to get it, for all of his bribes and underworld contacts. But the bribes and underworld contacts had served another purpose: Pubina had discovered when the Bergensons were due to return—and that was all he really needed.

Graff noticed abruptly that the terry was falling rapidly back at him. Could he be trying to warn—

A shriek gave him the answer. Less than a quarter-mile away, a brontosaurus squatted its tremendous bulk in a shallow pool and regarded him from the end of an undulating snake-like neck. The animal screamed again and Graff froze.

He watched the incredibly heavy reptile scramble to its feet and desperately tried to think. It wasn't a brontosaurus charge you had to be afraid of, but what usually traveled in its wake. A brontosaurus was herbivorous and, for all its size, extremely timid. It was ridiculous, possibly, but the mountain of living flesh was probably

screaming in terror at the sight of him. You only had to control yourself and think while the great beast charged.

Because a brontosaurus meets danger by running into it. It is so massive that it is virtually unstoppable once in motion. You can blast its stupid little head off and it will keep running for another twenty minutes, powered by the bundle of nerve cells just under the spine. You just have to stand still and remember that it is much more frightened than you and is trying to trample you to death before you can bite it.

Graff stood his ground, bending his knees slowly, until the behemoth was only twenty-five feet away. Then he straightened suddenly and leaped off to the right, then again, further, and again, still further to the right.

SCREAMING insanely, the tons upon tons of flesh roared past, absolutely unable to halt itself. Its momentum carried it up a small hill and Graff could hear it bellowing down the other side. It wouldn't return.

But something else was on its way. There's always a meat-eater in the wake of a brontosaurus. Sometimes there are several. The *kind* of carnivore was very important to Graff right now. He had an electroblast which he wasn't certain would work in an emergency and whose diminished power he'd certainly need later. And he had a stiletto.

He heard the beast thumping its way through the luxuriant weeds of the swamp. A moment later it had broken into the clear, had seen him and was loping toward him easily with all the confidence of a powerful creature which sees an easy meal in sight.

A shata. No larger than a terran wolf. But if a brontosaurus can be said to be all body-bulk and very little head, the shata is just the reverse. Twelve rows of teeth, and jaws which open wide enough to admit a sheep. Regretfully and a little uncertainly, Graff holstered the electroblast and balanced the stiletto on his palm. He'd hunted lots of shata in his time, but never with a knife.

He began weaving about, conscious of his awkwardness. The knots in his left side constantly made him misjudge his body and slip off balance. And here he was hoping



to take four men at a time—

As he expected, the shata was confused by his peculiar motion. It slowed to a dead stop, then slunk before him, growling. It moved in half-circles, coming in closer each time. Graff waited until it was directly in front of him. He stood still and immediately the shata sprang, jaws gaping.

The palate. Just behind the palate is the brain. It means sticking half your arm into a fearful set of jaws, but do it right.

Graff let the rigid, distended head slide off the knife and into the mud. He wiped his blade on the green fur, standing out like so many spikes, and grimaced. A nice specimen. Shatas were good eating, too.

Well, he wasn't a hunter any more. He was a dead man looking for a coffin. He was swamp-bait if he collapsed in this weedy muck.

The terry skimmed by with his head turned questioningly.

"I'm fine," Graff reassured him. "How much farther?"

"Between one and two of your hours." The lizard-bird curved up and ahead, leathery wings beating slowly.

Graff plodded on. He should arrive with about an hour and a half of life left. That would give him a half-hour to an hour at most in which to operate consciously and more or less effectively. After that there would be half an hour of writhing agony, leading into unconsciousness. After that he would be dead.

He'd hate to leave life. It meant leaving the thrill of tracking your quarry on the bracing slope of Mount Catiline where the dodle breeds in the Season of Wind-Driven Rains; it meant leaving a wild new world that was just a-borning as far as humanity was concerned; it meant leaving Greta Bergenson.

It also meant leaving wealth. Now that lobodin had been developed, the colonization of Venus would begin in earnest. He was the last alive of a numerous family who had homesteaded half the Galertan Archipelago into their possession. He was heir to all the rich, fertile, and deserted islands his father and brothers had claimed. With Ricardo's Virus taken care of, future Venusian farmers would pay well for those scattered spots of soil in the Jefferson Sea.

Following the terry, he hit the river again. He started downstream, looking for a ford as he had before. The Black was rather wide at this point and he wasted fifteen precious minutes before he found a bank that curved near enough to the opposite one to permit of a leap. He went into the weeds to get a running start.

A shadow plummeted past him.

"Vack," the terry screamed. "Get vack! Don't jumf here. Gridnik!"

Graff paused and peered across the river. Sure enough, there was the brown and white nest on the opposite bank where he would have landed. As he watched, a single gridnik droned out, looking like a winged red ant but with the size and disposition of a large, cornered rat.

"Thanks, MacDuff," he muttered, moving away. Well, there was no help for it. He didn't have time to look for another ford. He'd have to swim.

He waited on the crumbling bank until a dozen blue flashes swept past under him. "Sardine" schools were usually far enough apart to permit a fast swimmer to get through between them. When the tiny blue fish were fifty feet away, he dived.

The force of the river knocked the breath out of him. He fought his way through the torrent. His flailing hands touched a projecting piece of rock and he hauled himself painfully up the bank.

Graff noted gratefully that his head was clearer. The gnawing headache had diminished somewhat under the impact of the water.

The pterodactyl alighted near him. "There," it said, pointing ahead with a yellow claw. "Fuvina."

But the hunter was interested in something else. He removed his electroblast and examined its coils ruefully. The tight holster was supposed to be fairly waterproof, but it had not been intended for protecting a weapon in the Black River.

He started to throw it aside, but held it as he remembered how few cards he held in his hand.

**M**AX PUBINA'S hideout was a large prefabricated job that must have cost a medium-sized fortune to import from Earth across some thirty million miles of

empty space. The outlaw's house covered the top of a rise, and the soil around it was sufficiently high over the swamp proper to resemble the fine farmland of New Kalamazoo. Rich jungle growths were held at bay by a patch of sandy ground completely surrounding the house. It made it impossible for anyone or anything to creep up to the walls unobserved. Graff Dingle knew how expensive it must have been to sterilize so large an area of ground.

*Crime does not pay*, he mused. *Except on Venus.*

He reconnoitered the place cautiously, keeping well under cover. The man-made yard was empty. There was no one outside the house or the rocket-ship hangar attached to it. He could see the blunt nose of Pubina's sleek craft in the otherwise deserted hangar. But they probably had guards posted at the windows.

A long white line traced a curve in his path. Graff stepped over it gingerly, glancing to the left. Sure enough, hidden in thick bushes was the mass of white filaments that was the bulk of the sucking ivy. Touch the trigger-vine, however gently, with your foot . . .

He came back to the terry. "Listen, Mac-Duff," he said. "I want you to stay out of trouble as long as possible. When I need you, I'll need you bad. Meanwhile, on the wing or on the ground, you're a sucker for an electroblast with that wingspread. But you could be useful as a lookout. I wouldn't like to be outflanked."

A grave nod of the narrow beak. "This I do." The reptile soared up in a high spiral over the house.

Now. He had to get into the house across thirty-five feet of open ground, under the electroblasts of four highly proficient murderers. How?

The headache returned, stronger than ever, and Graff swayed dizzily. Red roaring fires tore up and down his left side. He'd never make it. Swamp-bait, that's all he was, bait for the mud of the Black.

He straightened then and laughed. Bait? Well, that was one way to hunt.

The hunter strode toward the house, across the creeper of sucking ivy, counting each step. He stopped under cover of a

sweeping fern just outside the sandy expanse.

"Pubina!" he yelled. "I've come for the Bergensons."

There was a flicker at one of the windows. "Who are you?"

"Graff Dingle of New Kalamazoo. Listen, Pubina, I'll trade the rest of our lobodin for Greta Bergenson and her father."

A pause while they digested this. Then: "Send one of your men in and we'll talk it over, Dingle."

"Can't. I'm alone. Send one of your men out with the Bergensons, and I'll give you the lobodin."

No reason for Pubina to be certain that the Bergenson lobodin represented the first and only shipment. And what he claimed to have would raise the quantity to the point where all of the outlaws could be vaccinated.

The terry came down behind him and whispered gently! "Three men leave house from rear. Two coming around on left, one on right. Man on right has clearer fath, so will ve here first."

Graff gestured assent with the electroblast. He heard the terry take off again.

Pubina was being safe and cozy. Sending his henchmen while he held the fort himself!

He heard a soggy clump to the right and grinned. Why, the man was making more noise than a dryhorn freshly arrived from Terra! When he saw the black waterproof jumper through the high weeds, he stepped out from under the fern and moved backwards. He held the electroblast out, as if it worked.

The outlaw's face, lined with years of dunging inhalation, broke into a lunatic smile. Since Graff wasn't looking at him, he deduced Graff hadn't seen him. Pubina's henchman took larger steps. Graff backed.

He counted as he retreated. He counted slowly, taking steps that were uniform and even, looking off to the side of the outlaw, trying to keep his tortured body from making a deadly mis-step.

There! He breathed gustily as he saw he'd passed the white line. The outlaw crept forward, crouching, trying to get close enough for a certain blast. He too noticed

the trigger vine, and stepped daintily across it.

Graff whirled to face him then, electroblast at the ready. The man jumped—and one boot dug into the creeper!

He barely had time to scream. A haze of white tendrils whipped around him, each armed with thousands of microscopic suckers. A moment later the bloodless husk that had been a human was being dropped from the sucking ivy's clutches, rattling like so much paper.

The scream had been heard. Graff's jungle-trained ears caught the whispers of the other two men on his left as they conferred worriedly. If only he had a decent weapon. Anything besides the stiletto! He could take such dryhorns with an old-fashioned pistol!

But he didn't have a pistol. All he had was twenty-seven years' experience on Venus as a native-born citizen. So he began to run.

He stopped after a moment and listened. The crashes behind him indicated he was being pursued. If he was afraid, the outlaws had evidently decided, he was weak enough to chase. Graff ran toward the Tuscany.

By the time he reached the river, he was weaving from side to side and sobbing. The exertion magnified his pain a thousandfold. His pursuers were getting closer. Desperately, he trotted downstream.

They were quite close now. He heard them chuckling and calling to each other triumphantly—but there was the Gridnik nest!

He waited just a moment, poised on the bank of the river, until they broke into the clear, almost within electroblast range. Then, as they caught sight of him and increased their speed, he hurled his useless weapon into the striped little dome—and jumped.

**W**HEN he came threshing out of the water, twenty feet further down the bank, the hideous swarm of insects were still gorging themselves. Graff crept away, nauseated. He rubbed his eyes against the darkness welling within them.

"MacDuff!" he called, his voice crackling with agony. "MacDuff!"

The terry swept down to his side.

"Listen, pal, I haven't got much time left,

so we'll have to hurry. No more fancy stuff. Think you can fly in the rear windows or something, by way of diversion? It'll give me time to cross the sandy stretch."

Without a word, the lizard-bird went away. Graff came to the edge of the arid soil surrounding the pre-fab and waited.

He saw the enormous shadow tilt down behind the house and heard the crash of breaking glass. He threw himself forward. Sand boiled away from his boots. His head wobbled as if his neck had ceased to exist. Must be getting close to deadline time, Graff decided. A few minutes more at most before he caved in completely. He drew the stiletto out, holding it with difficulty in a twitching hand.

There was a yell inside the house and the sizzle of an electroblast bolt. As he smashed into the door, he heard the electroblast go off again.

He saw a huge cage holding a fluttering pterodactyl as he tottered into the living room. Dr. Bergenson and Greta were tied to chairs with long coils of fongool vine. Greta's pink overall-jumper was ripped and there was the mark of a man's hand on her face. Pubina stood under a charred hole in the ceiling where his first blast had gone wild. At his feet, a hole neatly burned in one wing, writhed MacDuff, awaiting the finisher.

Pubina whirled to face Graff, his electroblast coming up swiftly. The hunter staggered toward him, fully conscious of his lack of speed, his almost infantile weakness. Knots of pain pulled at his knees.

The Heatwaver's forefinger flicked down on the firing button. MacDuff lifted himself on his one good wing and lunged at the boot before him. His long beak closed on Pubina's ankle. There was a horrible bony crunch and the outlaw cursed, turning to beat down at the reptile.

Graff reached them, almost falling against Pubina. For a moment he couldn't coordinate his arm muscles enough to use the stiletto; then, sinking his teeth deep into his own lip, he drove the thin blade ahead. Pubina shrieked and fell, the stiletto throbbing in his side.

Deciding to let MacDuff finish him, even if the terry was making a mess of it, Graff bent over clumsily and retrieved the electro-

blast Pubina had dropped. He almost went over backwards as he straightened.

Placing one foot in front of the other intently, he walked to the Bergensons. He slid like a man walking on banana skins. Darkness roiled all about him now and every cell in his body seemed to writhe.

The bottle containing the vaccine was on a table, he noticed. It was still full; the shining hypodermic beside it was empty. Good.

Very carefully, he burned off the fongool vine with the electroblast at low power. Greta rushed toward him, but he slipped and fell at her feet.

"Darling," he heard her sob; it sounded as if her voice were on the other side of the Jefferson Sea. "You're infected! Oh, Graff, Graff! The lobodin won't work on an infected case!"

"I know," he muttered thickly, and let his head loll round to where the terry was inching along the floor to the cage in the corner. The last thing he saw was the neat little hole in the wing.

"Be seeing you, MacDuff," Graff whispered as the darkness came down, pinpointed with multitudes of exploding yellow dots . . .

That was why he was so surprised when he opened his eyes to see the terry

perched by his bed with a neat patch of gauze taped to one wing.

"How in hell did you pull through, MacDuff?" he asked.

"The same way as you," the lizard-bird told him. "We are both natives of Venus."

"Huh?" He raised himself waveringly on one elbow. He was lying in the Bergenson home in New Kalamazoo. They must have used Pubina's rocket ship to fly back. "What do you mean—*native*?"

"Just what he says, Graff." Greta pushed open the screen-door and bustled in with a pile of linen. "You were both born on Venus. Father says that you must have had all kinds of skin abrasions as an infant: your body developed a natural immunity to Ricardo's Virus. We'll still use the vaccine on everybody else, including the children, just to be on the safe side. But Father has felt for a long time that the blood of the pioneers would adjust to its environment. When you got sick, but didn't die, you proved it."

"Well, I'd like to point out," Graff said, as he sat up to permit Greta to change his sheets, "that I am very, very happy to have given your father a chance to prove that theory."

MacDuff closed a lidless eye in an assenting reptilian wink.



# HAPPY RAIN NIGHT

By DEAN EVANS

*It was the Big Sleep for those at Residential Number 327  
this night . . . this very dark Martian night . . .  
this very good night for the Synthi-Rain.*

IT WAS the eve of the annual synthi-rain and all Mars was settling down for the big sleep that always went with it. Everything was ready, reso-skins had been peeled off the pumps a week before.

*Uh huh*, thought the lone attendant at the fuelport outside the city. You could tell everything was ready, even the traffic was thinning. Hadn't been a 'copter or anything in for fuel in the last ten minutes.

He eyed the wall clock inside his cubicle. Almost eleven. Might as well close up and go on home, there wouldn't be any more customers in tonight.

He suddenly decided to modify that thought as an old hull-weary job came banging clumsily down into cradle number one and slumped, little vibration tentacles rippling here and there over its surface. He sighed, went out the lock, went over to the cradle.

There was a woman in the ship. Not much of a woman, but you never knew what the big gambling city of Fraon would draw next in the line of tourists. All kinds.

Like this one. This one could be called typical. Wild black hair on the dame. Not long, but wild. A little sloppy, like the last-season's moda-strap she wore on the white skin between her breasts. The strap looked fringy.

"Fuel, Miss?" he asked.

But the woman didn't seem to hear. She was studying a small scanning disc, turning it this way and that like somebody pruning herself. Only not. She was giving the place the once over.

"Yeah," she said finally. "Yeah, but not the kind you think . . ." she stopped. She glared suddenly across the ramps at another jet—a Security Ship—that was coming in

fast, settling for the cradle next to hers.

"No," she said. "No. Changed my mind. How far's Fraon from here?"

"You're on the edges now. Follow the bottom lane and drop when you see the lights. That be all?"

But the woman didn't answer. She yanked at controls inside the cabin and the old beat up jet rose with a tired, grumbling roar like the sigh of a very old man contemplating the long long years that have gone.

Ten minutes later she looked down, yanked once more on the controls. She'd almost overshot. The ship shuddered violently fore to aft and then jammed down inside the Administration Port.

She hunched her shoulders inside the plastiskin, let her eyes go up to a sucker sign off in the distance. She read:

## CITY OF FRAON, GAMBLER'S PARADISE

And in smaller letters beneath:

COME CLEAN—GO AWAY THE SAME

She curled her lip. Between Fraon and the city of Jao to the south, the planet had quite a bit of "Paradise." Of the two cities, though, Fraon was the larger; Fraon would be the logical one. That's why she'd chose to try it first. That's where *he* would come.

She left the ship and made her way over to the Guide, a small niche of a place set into the corner of the now darkened Administration building. The Guide was open but it didn't look as though it was doing any business. She went inside.

There weren't any customers at all. The only person in the place was a young, greasy



looking man, an attendant, who just now was looking bored and fingering a black pencil line mustache.

THE greasy looking man raised his eyes. His finger left off caressing his mustache, and he studied the woman coming toward the desk. H'mm. Nice build. A little on the rough side, like something left out in the atmosphere too long, but all in all not too bad. Beggars can't be choosers. Not on Rain Night they can't. Not way out here on the edge of nothing at eleven in the evening when everybody's gone home, they can't.

He pushed the machine of buttons across the desk toward the woman. "Just in off the deserts?" he asked.

The woman tossed hair out of her eyes. She gave the greasy man a look. She eyed his mustache. She didn't say anything.

The greasy man grinned. Not hard to get, he thought, just a little careful. A little careful till she found out what he had to offer—generally speaking.

"Five more minutes before we close," he said, his grin changing to a leer. "You look a little lonely, sister. Me, I'm right there beside you yanking on the same controls. Look, it's Rain Night, sure, and most everything'll be closed in another hour but I know of a place . . ." he left the rest unsaid. He raised an eyebrow significantly.

The woman didn't say anything. She dropped a teal credit into the slot on the control box, punched a button. Nothing happened. Then the teal came rattling back at her through the reject. She looked up.

"Something?" the greasy man said.

"Yeah, I punch the button for a room and all that happens is my money coming back."

"A room?" He looked incredulous. "On Rain Night? Don't be absurd, sister. All taken days ago. Might try the 'Coptels. They might have a vacancy. But why worry about that? Like I said . . ."

He leaned over the counter, leaned over toward the woman. Leaned right into a heat gun that had appeared like old-time magic in the woman's right hand.

"Hey!"

"You're the soul of Martian generosity," the woman said evenly. "On you it sprouts

ears. I could see that eight lanes up. Open the bank, I need a fistful of credits."

"Huh?"

"Open the bank."

He was getting to believe it. And not liking it. He glared at the woman, then glared down at the heat gun in her hand. He growled indignantly:

"Why you lousy space tramp, I oughta . . ."

"Hold it!" Something hard was in the woman's voice.

But he didn't hold it. His hand went out darting, and his fingers clutched for the alarm buttons on the bank. And they almost made it, those fingers of his. They came within a thought-space of making it.

But didn't, actually.

The heat gun made a funny sound like a tiny jet biting at solid atmosphere. The greasy man's hand stayed for an instant, his fingers playing little chords of agony in the air.

Somebody like him. After that his body folded forward and his head came down over the machine. His mustache, somehow, didn't look so very good now.

The woman went around the counter, punched the control buttons on the rear of the bank. At once two compartments came out and she looked down into a mess of teal credits that would choke a moon crater. She frowned. Then she transferred the platinum teels to the big pocket in her plastiskin, closed the compartments, went around to the front of the desk again, and looked down at the buttons.

She dropped a teal in the slot and touched the 'Coptel button. The greasy man had been right, there were some left. From the side of the machine came her reservation identity key.

She had a last word for the greasy man: "Happy Rain Night, Buster."

She went out of the place, went back to her ship, dropped the identity key in a small slot on the instrument panel and closed the control lever. From here on the 'Coptel would do the directing and controlling of the weary ship. She leaned back, felt at the bulging pocket in her plastiskin.

She needed those teal credits. She didn't know how much, but she knew she'd need a lot, for *he* could always be found where the money was. Or the women. Or both.



THE 'Coptel court was empty. Cold winds just in off the deserts swept little memories of sand around, flicking at 'Coptel walls with a dry, brittle sound. The woman left her ship, went through the 'Coptel lock, dumped the bag she'd taken with her from the ship onto the bed. She looked around. Then sniffed softly. It didn't matter what the place looked like, she wouldn't be here long enough to notice.

She showered, and for the next ten minutes worked hard on her hair. After that she went to the bag over on the bed and took from it a new plastiskin with a gleaming, golden-colored modo-strap. She pulled it over very white thighs, struggled her arms in. All that remained was to transfer the teal credits and the gun. After that she went out to the ship and set the controls for take-off in fifteen minutes.

Going down the 'Coptel ramp to the spacelators she chuckled softly to herself. The ship would go up to the eighth lane and stay there. She wondered what the Security people would think when they found it up there with nobody in it.

The croupier at the telecto-spin table was a funny sort of a guy, a philosophic guy. Standing at one table night after night you get like that. He liked to study the people who came here to *Half-Century House* to gamble. Some could afford it, some could not.

That black-haired woman over by the quarter-teel machines for instance. The one with the cheap new plastiskin with the phony golden modo-strap on it. Take her. Ten to one she worked somewhere in a mining office and managed to put away, by great sacrifice, a little something from her salary each week.

Ten to one she'd done this for a year just so she could come up here to Fraon and have herself a whirl in the gaming houses for one or two days. How do you like that? And ten to one she'd go home broke as hell and go back to the slaving routine some more. Unless, of course, she could discover for herself some other less laborious way of making a fast teal.

Not a bad looking woman, either, he thought. There was something—some tiny little thing—about her that puzzled him, but he couldn't put his finger on it. He

watched her play the machines, watched her as she scanned the place with dark eyes that missed about as much as the teal-collector on tax day. Odd. She didn't seem to be paying any attention to the machines she was playing, she seemed more interested in the motley crowd in the place.

Oh, well. Just another woman. Another twenty minutes and they'd be closing up and he could go home for the big sleep everybody enjoyed during the synth-rain. He spun his wheel idly and looked away.

"You running this wheel or just modeling for a space artist?"

The croupier jerked his eyes around. Then he blinked. The woman with the black hair and the golden modo-strap was standing at his wheel giving him a sour eye. He pulled himself together, worked a little house-smile for her.

"Dreaming," he admitted. "Like to try the wheel?" He felt sorry for her. Poor kid, she should stick to the quarter-teel machines.

He watched her flip the pocket in her plastiskin. He watched her with eyes that began to bulge as he saw the amount of credits she piled out on the table in front of him.

"What's the current odds on whether the scientists have figured out whether space is infinite?" she asked.

His eyes were still bulging, but he looked away, checked on the chart. My God, the long shots these amateurs take! "One hundred and two thousand to one," he said. "As of ten twenty-two tonight, which is the last quotation I have."

The woman nodded. "That gives me plenty of room for my elbows. Spin the wheel and see how I'm doing."

The croupier hesitated. "Those credits," he said warningly. "You mean to bet them all?" He made a rapid calculation out of the corner of his eye. "You must have five or six hundred thousand . . ."

That made the woman grin. "Shucks," she said. "What do you take me for?"

The croupier blinked again. He was quite sure he didn't know.

"BET one thousand only," she said. She watched him sigh with relief. Funny, she thought. The guy had a conscience, and in a place like this. She watched him spin,

watched the telecto-spin whirr, slow, come to a clicking stop.

"Ninety-nine thousand six hundred and four," he said. "To one."

"Uh huh. And now what does the chart say?"

The croupier checked. "One hundred and two thousand to one. It hasn't changed. Sorry, Miss." He raked in the teels.

"That was fun," said the woman. "So much fun I'm getting bored stiff. Rake in the rest of these teels, too. Stick 'em in your pocket."

"WHAT?" The croupier's eyebrows jumped.

"Yeah."

He blinked. Studied. Blinked again. His philosophic thoughts were going out the space lock fast. He was trying to revise, trying to bring himself up to date. He wasn't getting anywhere. That golden-modo-strap was phony. A child could see it was. And yet . . .

"I'm not so good on my telepathy to-night," he said coldly.

"Skip it. I'm like a guy named Slan you used to read about. Had shields up around my brain."

That brought a cell of silence around the table. The croupier didn't speak, didn't blink, didn't breathe, didn't do anything.

"Looking for a man," said the woman finally. "Space-happy guy named Artie Sterling. Know him?"

The croupier caught a glint of something hard in the woman's eyes. He still didn't say anything.

"Don't think you're selling a good joe down the canal," the woman went on. "If you thought that, drop it. There isn't a creeping, crawling, oozing thing on all Mars to compare with him. I know. Who would know better than me?"

The croupier still didn't say anything. But his eyes said it for him; they were asking a question as big as space itself.

"The guy's my husband," said the woman. She stopped. She studied the worry lines that responsibility had embedded in the croupier's forehead.

She said: "You look like a nice hard-working man, to me. A good family man. You probably got a nice wife, couple of nice kiddies at home. You worry a little some-

times, though, because the money a croupier makes isn't a hell of a lot. And growing youngsters need this and that and the bills pile up and a man worries and the end isn't in sight because you're young yet and there's years and years of struggle still coming up."

The croupier swallowed. He took a breath. He looked down at the thousands of teal credits on the table. He looked up again.

"Look at me," said the woman. "Look at what the guy did to me. You can see it in my eyes."

The croupier did look. Then he took another breath and then he looked down once more at the money on the table, and then he did something that would probably make him spit for the rest of his life every time he stared into a mirror. He whispered:

"Yeah. I know Artie Sterling. He was in here this evening early."

*Uh huh. And now the big one.* "Where'd he go?"

The croupier took a last long drowning breath and his rake started to pull in the teels. "Okay, lady, okay. The guy's shackled up right now in Residential, Number 327. With somebody else's wife. That what you want to know? That what you wanted me to say?"

The woman didn't answer. She let her eyes slit contemptuously for an instant before she turned, moved away from the table, and went quickly toward the lock that led to the spacelators outside.

**A**RTIE STERLING pulled the woman's arms from around his neck. "Look, baby," he said. His handsome forehead wrinkled, a little annoyed.

"Arthur . . ."

"Time to be shoving off, baby."

"Shoving off?" The woman's large brown eyes balled with dismay.

"Yeah. Frankly . . ." he lifted his shoulders lightly ". . . frankly, the only reason I dropped in tonight was to sort of say goodbye. Get it?"

"Arthur!" There was shock in the woman's voice.

"Yeah. Look. Let's not push it into a corner like somebody's unwanted asteroid. Let's look at the thing. We've been slicker than the skids on the spacelator, baby, but it can't last forever. Sooner or later that

husband of yours is gonna open his dopey eyes. And then what?" He made a little mocking shudder. "And baby, if there's anything I *don't* want, it's to tangle with the Chief of all Space Security."

He grinned at the small figure of the woman beside him. "Up to now it's been great laughs on dull nights, but you know something? Every now and then I ask myself: suppose this guy, this Chief of Security—your husband, you know—suppose one of these nights he should get off a little early. Suppose he should come home an hour or two before we expect him?"

"Oh!" The woman smiled nervously. "That what's worrying you, honey? That's silly. John never does that. Never comes home early. Forget it."

Artie Sterling raised an impatient eyebrow. How do you tell off a dame when she doesn't want to believe it? He untangled himself from the woman's arms. He got to his feet. He said sharply:

"Look, baby. Here it is: it's done, see? Great fun, like I said, but it's done. Gone. Burned out like the hulls of hell. I'm shoving off."

That one did it. The woman was suddenly aware of it. He could tell that by the way her eyes shot open and then dulled quickly. That's the way they all act at first. They get over it, of course, but at first it's always like that.

He watched her get to her feet. Admiringly. He still appreciated the neat little figure she had. Still admitted she was a doll to look at. He watched her go to a black metallic desk against a wall. Open the center drawer. He said protesting: "Baby, I don't want that bracelet back I gave you. Hell, that's a souvenir. Keep it. When old Artie gives a gal something he means it."

"I'm not giving back the bracelet, Arthur." The woman's hand went into the drawer, came out again. The hand held a heat gun. "No, Arthur. Not the bracelet."

"Baby!" Utter shock laved the handsome man's features.

"You wanted goodbye, Arthur? All right. If that's the way you want it. If you're sure."

"For God's sake. . .!"

"The night of the big sleep, Arthur." Her finger jerked on the heat trigger.

The man was only human after all. His

hands came clutching tight, pressing frantically at a spot about where his navel would be. But it was late for that, and when he fell it was straight forward and down.

The woman looked at the handsome black waves of his hair. Death doesn't change that. No, not immediately, it doesn't. She sobbed once and fainted.

The guy had been right, although he didn't know it. And the woman had been dead wrong, although she didn't know it. Chief of Security, John Henderson, had on this night of the synthi-rain, quit a little early. Had, on this not-very-busy night gotten home a little sooner than usual. About an hour and a half sooner, to be precise. He had come in through the rear lock. Had come in quietly, for he planned a little surprise for his wife. Had stood very quietly in the doorway of the darkened anteroom that led directly to the living room. And he had listened. And he had watched.

He came through the doorway. He leaned down over his wife, took the gun from her hand and laid it on a table. He leaned down once more, took the woman in his arms. There was something quite impossible to express in his eyes.

He took her to the bedroom, put her down carefully, studied the shock-stiffness of her form. He went to a wall cabinet, got a hypodermic, found an artery in the woman's arm. Her breathing at once calmed, flattened. Sleep-breathing now.

The man back in the living room was a little larger problem. He was quite heavy for his slender build. Henderson half carried, half dragged, the body out through the front lock and out to the 'copter port alongside the house.

Artie Sterling's 'copter was there. Henderson had seen it when he came home but there hadn't been any significance to it then. He stuffed the body into the freight deck. Then he carefully latched the lock shut. Registration numbers on the ship gleamed dully in the half darkness. X-13-X. "X," the unknown, "13," the ill-fated.

He went back to the house, pulled the metal lock to behind him. He stood rigidly for a long long while. Thinking.

He went over to the transmitter set in the corner of the room and looked down at it. He brought his right hand up, let it hover

over the control buttons.

The room was as silent as a room can ever be.

A buzzer suddenly bracked out. It was a loud, naked, startling sound. Like a bugle in an empty church, Henderson jerked. He gulped in a trembling breath, turned, nervously wet his lips. He went over to the outside front lock and pulled it open.

**I**T WAS a black-haired woman who had wide, wild eyes. The woman was wearing a golden-colored modo-strap between dead white breasts. And in her hand she clutched a heat gun.

"Back it right in, Buster!" The woman's voice was harsh. "You're not the one I want, but right now I'm not too choosy."

Henderson swallowed. He took a few backward steps. Then a few more. He watched the woman's shoulder nudge the lock shut. He watched her come toward him.

"That's far enough. Where is he? Where's Artie Sterling?"

Henderson didn't say anything. The woman's skin. White. Prison white. He knew.

The woman saw the heat gun on the table. She smiled, not amused, and picked it up. That made two guns leveled at Henderson.

"What I couldn't do with these. All right, where is he?"

But he didn't answer. Adjustment is a method thing.

The woman rapped: "Look, I got the word. They said I'd find my husband with somebody's wife. Here. At 327 Residential. That jar your memory?"

It seemed to, Henderson said softly: "Your husband?"

"Yeah. Up here with a guy's wife. How do you like that? There ain't enough unmarried kids around, he wants the married ones, too."

"He isn't here."

"Huh?" a little admiration lit up the woman's eyes. "Look, guy, you got guts. I'll hand you that. But tonight I ran across another who had guts too. You oughta see him now."

There was a silence then. You take away the sounds and there are always silences. And then:

"The guy's my husband, see? And once there was a time when I loved him. I loved him hard enough to figure he'd appreciate a little loyalty. I did five long years for that mistake. There was this woman—even then he had them, it seems—and I had the silly notion she was chasing him, instead of the other way around. So she died a little. And I did five years like I said. Can't you tell? Can't you see it on me?"

Henderson nodded.

"Sure. White, I am. You get that way after five years. Where is he?" The woman bared teeth. "Can't figure it, huh? Look, even in prison you get to hear things. Like I heard about him hanging out the 'business-as-usual' sign all the years I was inside. With the woman, I mean. Do you think he ever came to see me? Do you think he sent me letters? Post cards even?"

"All right, Yes, he was here. He isn't here now."

"Where is he?"

Henderson sighed. He looked into the guns in the woman's hands. "Did you ever hear of Jao?"

"Sure. Gambling city. Down south."

"Yes. And did you ever hear of Sarah Henderson?"

"No."

"My wife." He said it simply.

It took a few moments but the woman got it. She began to nod, began to get the comprehension in her stark eyes. She said after a little while: "I see, guy. I know how you feel. Is that what you had the gun out for? Uh huh. I can feel for you, believe me. Look. Yu got a can?"

"What?"

"Crate. Ship. 'Copter."

Another silence.

"Look. There's one outside. I saw it when I got off the spacelators. I'm going to sort of borrow it for a while. I've been doing it for weeks now chasing that bum all over the planet. So one more won't matter. I'm heading for Jao. Security will get it back for you. All I want is a little time."

**H**ENDERSON shook his head. "You won't make it. The rains have already started. All ships are grounded for the next twenty-four hours. Security ordinance."

The woman snorted. "I'll chance that. All



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**American Cancer Society**



I ask from you is a few hours before you report the stolen ship. Get it? And in return I'm doing you a favor when I find him. I'm trusting you, you trust me."

Henderson sighed. He looked at his heat gun in the woman's hand, looked up then into the woman's eyes.

She nodded. Put his gun back on the table. "Yeah. See what you mean. I won't need yours. A deal?"

"A deal." He watched her go. He listened to the 'copter take off. After that there was another silence in the room, a very heavy silence.

He slowly crossed to the transmitted set in the corner. Hesitated. Slowly brought

up his hand and touched a button. The little screen came into life. He said softly:

"Henderson to Flight 9."

"Flight 9. Yes, Chief."

His voice became even softer: "A 'copter. Registration X-13-X. Pilot Arthur Sterling. Took off five minutes ago from Fraon. Headed for Jao."

"One moment, Chief, I'll put radar on it." A pause. Then: "Right, sir. Got it. Coming fast. Helluva nerve that guy's got. Don't he know all ships are supposed to be grounded?"

Henderson shook his head. "It's all right. He had a little trouble. I gave permission to continue flight. Contact Jao, tell them I said not to bother it. Got that?"

"Whatever you say, Chief. Right."

"Thanks." Henderson flicked the set off. He looked over at the gun on the table. He picked it up, took it with him into the bedroom. He laid it on the unoccupied pillow next the sleeping woman's head. He didn't look down at her now. He quietly went back to the living room, went to a black metallic desk up against a wall. From it he took a very small box with a little gold plate inset in the lid. Engraving on the plate winked up in the light:

*From Sarah to John*

Wedding present.

He lifted the lid, looked down at a tiny reel of tape inside. He touched a button under the lid. Music filled the room quite softly for a moment. Organ music. Wedding music. And then no more music. But voices, a man's voice, and a woman's voice. When it got to the part where the woman's voice said, "I take thee, John . . ." he stopped it. He re-reeled the tape, put it back where it had been before. Then his trembling fingers touched the erase button, held it there until the entire little reel had run off.

After that there wasn't anything else to do but go to the front lock, go outside, go away from Residential Number 327. The night was dark, very dark. A very good night for the Rain.



-KELLY FREAS-52-



# Amour, Amour, Dear Planet!

By MARK CLUTTER

*A new and sinless world the anti-pleasure Mohcans sought.  
But they depended on their hostage, Spacecaptain Jan  
Obrien, to find it for them . . . and he was  
an amorous imp from way back.*

SPACECAPTAIN JAN OBRIEN was plain drunk and in no condition to handle an aircar. Which fact perhaps can be understood for a man who has not tasted the liquor of Terra in ten years and who comes home to his native planet to find it wrecked by the worst of its wars.

Obrien was in no condition, but nevertheless he was handling an aircar, whizzing down a Rocky Mountain canyon at a couple of hundred miles per hour. The time was barely dawn and the visibility was terrible.

"Slow down, Jan, slow down, slow down!" the sleek young tart in the transparent evening gown kept whimpering. She was not as drunk as Jan. Disgusted with the Chicago nightclub in which he had started his homecoming 12 hours before, Jan had hustled her into the aircar and started out vaguely for Portland or L.A. or both.

A solid cliff suddenly loomed out of the mist ahead. The girl covered her eyes and screamed shrilly. The quick-thinking habits of 20 years were not completely drowned in



liquor. Jan yanked at the controls, and the aircar shrieked in protest as it changed its direction to the vertical. Jan and the girl were hurled so violently into the transparent elastic protector curtain that they were stunned. When Jan came to, they were approximately two miles above Pike's Peak. The sunlight was dazzling.

"Hey, baby, we're still airborne," Jan cried, jabbing his elbow into the girl's ribs.

She looked down at the mountain and groaned.

"It takes more than an old cliff to do a spacecaptain in," Jan yelled. "Look baby, did you know we could do this?" Jan cut the power and let the aircar descend in a series of erratically fluttering loops. The mountain rushed up at them. The girl covered her eyes and sobbed, "Don't, please don't!"

The mountain top was covered with a multitude of people dressed in white. They faced a great golden crescent that gleamed like fire in the rising sun. Jan was so fascinated by the spectacle that his coordination failed him. He was conscious of the white-robed people fleeing in terror as he fought to regain control of the aircar.

They crashed. Their speed had been only about 50 miles per hour and the protectors saved them from injury. They scrambled out to survey the damage.

"Well, it won't fly again soon," Jan said. He breathed deeply of the thin air.

"What a hell of a place to crash," the girl said. "Those are Mohcans holding their spring equinox festival. They'll probably stone me." She looked down at her transparent gown. The white robed people had resumed their places and were singing a hymn as though nothing had happened. It was slow, sad, august, a mighty organ sound of human voices.

The girl's face was chalk white. "Let's run for it," she begged. "They're dangerous. They're dangerous as hell. Please believe me." She turned and started to run down the path that had once been the cogroad, stumbling in her high-heeled shoes.

Jan ran after her, weaving as though the mountain were a deck on the high seas.

He grabbed her by the arm. "Hey, baby, they don't sound dangerous," he said.

"They're just singing a kind of hymn as though nothing happened. The only rise we got out of them was the way they scattered when we started to crash."

"Come on, come on," she cried. "I know about these people. They'll be after us when the hymn stops."

"Okay, but you're talking foolish," he said. They started walking down the mountain. "Hell, those people won't do us any harm. They're too busy singing." He pulled out a pack of cigarets and lit one.

"You're space-crazy," she said. "Didn't you ever hear of the massacre of scientists at Harvard, or what they did to the chorus girls in 'Sex Happy'?"

**T**UGGING at his arm to get him to hurry, she told him about the Mohcans. The sect appeared toward the end of the war. Historically they were a blend of Christian, Mohammedan, Communist, and Hindu. Their prophet and leader, until his martyrdom, was Smith Akandi, an English-Hindu half-caste who was reared in Moscow. Their creed was anti-science and anti-pleasure. Thousands of them were executed during the war, but hundreds of thousands were converted.

"Half way I am for them," the girl said. "Just look at me." She tore a bit of her gown contemptuously. "I've given a good time to soldiers, sailors, and spacemen, and a fat lot of happiness it's given me. Jan darling, would you like to settle down with me in a little radioactive suburb and beget a three-headed monster?"

Jan laughed. "Baby, in all the worlds I have never begotten even a two-headed monster. At least, not to my knowledge. But why are they so bitter at science?"

"Why not, stupid? You saw what science did to Chicago."

"Oh, that?" Jan said. "You're taking too limited a view. Chicago is only a speck on a speck out there among the suns and the planets."

"To hell with that talk. I saw my parents burned alive."

"I'm sorry."

They passed the timberline and entered a forest.

"You've convinced me," Jan said. "They're dangerous. Damn these regula-

tions that say a man can't wear his blasters on Terra. If they're looking for us, they'll catch us. We'd better hide out until night."

They found a sun-warmed, grassy spot hidden among three boulders. Jan held her in his arms until she quit shivering from fear and the still chilly mountain air. Then he went to sleep.

He was awakened by a kick in the ribs. He jumped to his feet, clawing desperately for the blasters he didn't have.

"You're covered, space-devil!"

He was ringed by some twenty white robed men armed with weapons ranging from daggers to blasters. Their faces were bearded and their eyes were hot with fanaticism. Their leader was a seven-foot African with a gold ring in his nose.

"Give clothes to the obscene one," the African said.

One of the men threw a white robe around the girl. She wrapped it around her and sat cowering in fright.

"Come with us now, space-devil," the black giant said. "The prophet wants to see you. We won't kill you if you cooperate."

Another Mohcan kicked the girl. "Get up!"

"Leave her alone!" Jan shouted. The African slapped him across the face with the barrel of his blaster.

"She'll get what the chorus girls got," the African said, speaking very slowly. "She'll get what they got if you don't obey. And you will be killed. Now march!"

They climbed the Peak again at a rapid pace. A heel came off the girl's shoe. Two burly Mohcans seized her arms and half-carried, half-dragged her to the top. Jan found it hard to keep pace with them. Whenever he slowed down, the African prodded him with the blaster.

The multitude was still singing. Their eyes were vacant with self-hypnosis as they swayed to the slow, sobbing chant. The girl was turned over to a party of women. The African marched Jan to a place apart from the crowd where a man with a long yellow beard sat crosslegged on a rock.

"This is the Prophet," the African said. "Sit on the ground and wait for him to speak. I will leave you now but I have you covered." He withdrew about twenty yards and squatted on his heels, his blaster across

his knees.

Jan sat down and waited. The prophet sat abnormally still, his legs crossed like a yogi. He was staring upward, almost directly into the sun. He was a lean, youngish man with a beaked nose that gave him a cruel, hawk-like look. The beard, yellow as young cornsilk, fluttered slightly in the breeze. Otherwise, there was no movement. Jan could not even see him breathe.

After a long time, during which Jan felt his face numbly aching from the African's blow, the Prophet suddenly fixed his eyes on him with the same unwavering stare he had devoted to the sky.

"Peace be with you."

"Nuts," Jan replied.

The Prophet took no notice of the remark. "Allah has seen fit to grant me wisdom," he said. "In a dream he has revealed to me the purpose of science."

"How very interesting."

"SCIENCE exists so that a handful of the elect can escape from this doomed planet. It was Allah's will that you should come to us this morning."

"The hell you say."

"I perceive by your uniform that you are a spacecaptain. How many men can your ship carry?"

Jan did not answer.

"It would perhaps be better for you to cooperate." The Prophet glanced meaningfully toward the African.

"It's no secret. About 100 passengers and a crew of 50."

"About standard size. I suppose about half of your men are on duty."

"Yeah."

"And that is enough to man the ship on a peaceful mission?"

"I have no intention of manning the ship right away."

"I will decide that. We blast off as soon as we can get to Chicago."

"You'll get mighty hungry in space. The ship isn't provisioned."

"We have an airtruck loaded with standard rations. There is no use discussing the matter. You and your men will cooperate or die. Brother Samuel, take charge of the prisoner."

The Prophet arose and walked slowly

to the platform beside the Crescent. The singing stopped.

"The time for departure has come. The chosen ones will come forward. Sister Jessie, will you 'phone the hangar?" Brother Samuel marched Jan over to the chosen group.

Jan looked at the hundred men and women and decided that it would be hard to find a better band of pioneers. They were stalwart, healthy, very serious young people.

The multitude began a great throbbing hymn of farewell. It continued until two huge airtrucks, one for passengers and one loaded with freight, arrived, landing carefully at the edge of the crowd.

Jan had been looking for his friend of the night. Finally he found her standing between two powerful females. She did not see him. She seemed to be looking and listening to something far away. Jan realized that she had discovered a new meaning in existence. "Goodbye, baby," he said to himself.

Each pioneer was being issued a blaster as he or she entered the passenger airtruck. The African, Jan, and the Prophet were the last to enter. The Prophet stood for a moment on the last step and raised his arms in benediction. They took off for Chicago.

The Prophet sat beside Jan. "This may seem mad to you, spacecaptain, but I assure you that it is quite sane," he said. "Your arrival was the miracle which will merely make our task easier. I have planned this for months. I picked 50 men and 50 women who seemed most capable of standing life on a new world. About half of them are married. The others will be soon. I have taken a vow of celibacy. We will found a new and better kingdom of Allah out there among the stars.

"Our problem, of course, has been that of getting a ship and a competent crew. None of us are spacemen. Seizing the ship would be easy; to get a proper crew is another matter.

"We have alerted our friends in Chicago by radio, and they are even now assembling at the spaceport. They are well armed and will take care of any trouble from the military or the police. We will, of course, seize your crew."

Jan was finding it hard to think. "If I

say the word, they will fight."

"What folly that would be," the Prophet said. "They would all die. You would be pronouncing a death sentence on your own men. Men with whom you have lived and suffered many things. Godless dog that you are, you couldn't do that."

Jan was silent for a long time. At last he said, "You leave me no choice but to obey."

The airtrucks settled smoothly beside the rocket, the only one on the field. Just before they landed, the Prophet said, "You and Brother Samuel will lead the attack. You will order the gangway watch not to fire."

As the airtruck came to a halt, the Prophet opened the door. "Secure the rocket!" he cried. Jan leaped to the ground with the African close behind him, and ran to the ship, shouting, "Brown Brown, lay down your blaster! Brown, lay down your blaster!"

The Mohcans swarmed aboard, their weapons at the ready. Within two minutes the ship was theirs and the work of loading provisions had begun. Six of them stood guard around the ship.

Volley after volley of blaster fire broke out around the administration building. Then a police car came racing across the field. The Mohcans on guard and the police opened fire. The action was brief. Only half a dozen shots were fired before the police car went out of control and turned turtle with a shattering crash. One of the Mohcans lay dead. A tall blonde threw herself on him, crying "Jack, Jack, oh, Jack!"

The Prophet went to her and picked her up. "There will be time later for weeping, Sister Ellen," he said. Firmly he carried her aboard the rocket.

THE pioneers had been well trained. Within less time than Jan would have believed possible they had their rations aboard and were in their acceleration compartments. Jan took his place in front of the master controls. The Prophet and the African stood behind him.

He turned on the public address system. "All hands, hear this," he said. "We have been kidnapped and are about to blast off for an unknown destination. Prepare to

blast off."

Jan took a last look at Terra. The administration building was on fire.

"Ready to blast off," he said into the microphone.

"No. 1 ready, sir."

"No. 2 ready, sir."

"No. 3 ready, sir."

Jan looked around for the African and the Prophet. They had taken their places in the acceleration compartments behind him.

"All hands and passengers, we are about to leave Terra for an unannounced destination. You who have never experienced space travel will find the first half hour somewhat uncomfortable. Do not be afraid. You will survive with no damage to your health. We are now leaving Terra." Jan pressed the button.

"Oh Lord, oh Lord," he thought. "This is as bad as the first time." No man ever got used to the horror of blast-off and acceleration. When he was again really conscious, the moon was larger than the earth.

"Prophet," he said, "you can now come out of your compartment. Where are we going?"

The Prophet came and sat beside him.

"I am not a spaceman," he said. "I don't know. Any planet that is uninhabited but suitable for human life will do. Keep away from the human colonies if you value your life."

Jan laughed. "You told me that you had planned all this."

"I planned everything except our destination. On earth we only hear of the human colonies. Spacemen seldom publish their adventures on the uninhabited worlds."

"Well," said Jan, "I could take you to Big America where you could live like Eskimos at the equator. Or I could take you to Mark Twain where there is plenty of fruit and game but where a human being weighs about 400 pounds and usually lacks the energy to lift a hand or pull a trigger. Or how about Satan, which is populated with very intelligent and very poisonous snakes? Or Melville, which is all fresh water ocean and living would be easy if one didn't mind eating fish and if there were anything to make ships out of. Or Boxley, where a

hundredweight of lead would scarcely keep you on the ground. There are so many places where Terrans can survive."

"Do we have to decide right now?"

"No. We are going in the general direction of the known inhabitable worlds. You will have two weeks, earth time, to decide."

The interview pleased Jan immensely. At least in the most important matter he would be in command if he played his cards right.

The voyage settled down to routine. The passengers sang and prayed about half the time. The crew stayed out of their way as much as possible, which was an ideal situation from the standpoint of morale. There was, of course, the problem of Jimpson, cook third class, who donned a white robe and neglected to shave before ten days had passed. Jan decided to ignore the matter.

Fortunately the crewmen were all non-Terrans. He had wisely let the earthmen have the first liberty in their home port.

The Mohcans had the usual trouble of first passengers in adapting themselves to non-gravity. They bumped their heads rather badly on the bulkheads before they learned that practically no force was required to get from one place to another.

The only passenger who gave him trouble was the one called Sister Ellen, widow of the man who was killed in the fight with the police. After about five days, earth time, he was surprised to find her kneeling outside his stateroom. The fact that she was floating about six inches off the deck made the posture slightly ludicrous. Her face, however, was very beautiful with its expression of calm, serious contemplation.

"What are you doing here?" Jan asked.

"I'm praying for you."

"Why?"

"Because you are a lost soul and because our lives are in your hands."

Jan stared at her in amazement. "I've seen everything now," he thought. She was truly a beautiful woman, tall, strong, very fair. Her long golden hair floated in a cloud about her head.

"Aren't you the woman whose man was killed at the spaceport?"

"Yes. The others have selfish attachments. I have none. That is why I am praying for you."

Jan had an impulse to order her back to the passengers quarters. The woman was so beautiful and the situation so unprecedented that he didn't do it. Instead, he said, "Thank you for your interest. You must never bother me or my crew with your devotions. No singing or praying aloud. You must stay out of our way while we are working."

"I will, sir."

JAN decided that she was mad. Her vigils were practically continuous. Whenever he came out of his stateroom he usually found her floating in a kneeling position in the passageway. She seemed to have little interest in him as a person, and on the few occasions in which he tried to talk to her, her answers were laconic but sensible enough. After awhile he got so used to seeing her that he was able to ignore the situation.

Jan spent many hours trying to decide on a destination that would suit both him and his kidnappers. He had visited a couple of hundred worlds and read about many others. He was tempted to try for planetfall on a human world, but he realized that the chances against landing successfully without the entire crew being massacred were pretty slight.

He flipped through the microbooks for an idea. The word "Aphrodite" gave him the answer. Nine years before he had spent a brief liberty on that planet. During the next several off-watches he read everything available on that planet.

At last he felt he knew enough to risk an interview with the Prophet.

"I believe I have found the world you want," Jan told him. "It is a planet slightly smaller than Terra. Unlike Terra, it has no continents but numberless islands ranging in size from about that of New Guinea to atolls.

"It is closer to its sun than Terra is to Sol; consequently, the equator is uninhabitable. The sea actually boils in that region. But both hemispheres, from the poles to the tropics, are ideal for Terrans. Incidentally, the sea is so fresh that you can drink it without any bad effects from the salt. The soil is very fertile, and the low gravity makes it possible to do a great deal of farming with much less effort than on Terra.

The only reason why this world has never been colonized is that it offers practically nothing for trade. There are no known mineral deposits of any consequence. Fish and vegetables are scarcely interstellar commodities."

"I don't like the name of the planet," the Prophet said.

"What's in a name?" Jan asked. "It was named by a bunch of sex-crazy spacemen. Change it to Houri or Mahomet or what you will."

"Is there any humanoid life?" the Prophet asked. "I have seen those misbegotten sons of the Evil One. They are even worse than the lost sons of Terra."

Jan became cautious. "There are no humanoids," he said. "The dominant race is bird-like. No one knows much about them. They have a language of their own, and they can understand some human ideas. They are very intelligent, according to some explorers, but they have no science. They seem to have some primitive idea of God. Perhaps you could make them see the Truth.

"I have seen them and even talked with them, if you can call it talking. They are about the size of eagles, but they are not predatory against land animals. They are very clever fishers and will teach you the art. They are friendly and curious.

"I'll tell you what you can do. We have approximately a week before we have to decide. Why don't you read the microbooks? They will tell you everything that the spaceships have discovered."

For the next earth week the Prophet, his legs crossed like a yogi, floated above the deck in front of a microbook screen.

"The planet called Aphrodite, which will be called Houri from henceforth, is my choice," he said at last.

Jan went into his stateroom and heaved a sigh of relief. Then he busied himself with the complications of setting a course for Houri nee Aphrodite.

The rest of the voyage was uneventful. They made a successful landing on the large north pole island. For several hours they waited for the molten glass of the blasted beach to cool before venturing to open the hatch. Both Mohcans and crew were sick with the pangs of restored gravity. The Mohcans attempted hymns of deliver-

ance but broke them off breathlessly before they were finished.

Jan hoped to unload his unwanted passengers and then blast off for the nearest planet with a human colony. Quietly he had passed the word to all the crew except Jimpson the convert.

He had reckoned without taking into consideration the cunning of the Prophet. When Jan gave the word to open the hatch, each crewman found himself covered by a pair of blasters.

"Leave the ship," the Prophet ordered.

They marched slowly, heavily, in the unfamiliar gravity across the beach to the forest. The trees were filled with the bird-like dominant race. One of the Mohcans lifted a blaster.

"I don't think I would do it," Jan said. "No one knows just what these creatures can do. It might be the last act of our lives."

"Don't shoot," said the African. "Halt! Wait for the Prophet."

THEY stood drooping with the weight of gravity looking toward the rocket in its field of glass and the pink and violet surf beyond. Jan glanced at the bird creatures in the nearest tree. A big cock with green and lavender plumage said, "Coo?" in a definite question.

Jan shook his head unhappily. The bird looked at him for a moment with big lavender eyes, then lifted with easy grace on great wings and flew slowly from tree to tree singing a troubled message.

The Prophet came from the rocket ship. He walked extremely fast considering the gravity. When he reached the group he handed Jan a slip of paper.

"I made these adjustments," he said. "Tell me, won't the ship explode in about half an hour?"

Jan studied the figures on the paper.

"Yes," he said dully.

"You are indeed fortunate," the Prophet said. "I figured it out by studying the micro-books. I had determined from the day we left earth that I would never permit you to leave and spread the alarm. I would have killed you all. But Allah tells us to be merciful. Perhaps I will let you live now."

"We will all die if we don't get out of

here fast."

He turned and began to run into the forest. The birds seemed to understand and rose in a swarm from the trees. The crew and the Mohcans followed in sudden panic.

The weeks of no-gravity played havoc with them. They ran heavily, sobbing and falling, through the woods. Some of them lost their way. They struggled ever so slowly through the open forest and slowed down to a walk on the mountain side that rose abruptly before them. Jan found a huge boulder and crouched behind it. Sister Ellen came after him. She was gasping with fatigue and terror.

He reached out and seized her white robe. "Here," he cried. "Take cover here."

Her hand closed on his desperately. Then she let go in terror and fell to her knees beside him. She locked her hands across her breast and looked upward to the pale green-blue sky.

Suddenly it seemed as though the whole earth were on fire. The sky turned to absolute white and the tops of the trees glowed orange red. There was a rending crash beyond any possibility of sound; then the absolute darkness and deafness of too much.

Jan struggled back to consciousness with a sense of beatitude. He was locked with Sister Ellen in a complete embrace, mouth to mouth, breast to breast, hip to hip. He watched the sky flame orange and red and finally gray black through her hair. He knew in that moment that without a ship, almost without humanity, life was good on Aphrodite.

And then the woman was struggling with him. "Oh, Allah, oh Buddha, oh Lenin, oh Lord, I have sinned, I have sinned!" she cried, and fled aimlessly into the burning forest.

Hours later, attracted by shot after shot from the Prophet's blaster, they assembled on a mountaintop. The fire had spent itself in the damp forest. Below them was a blackened area down to the sea. There was a bay where the rocket ship had been.

It was a sad and tired little column that filed down to the sea. On the beach they knelt and sang a hymn of deliverance and a service for the dead. Jan and the 13 surviving spacemen stood uncertainly in a group apart from the others.

At last the Prophet, who had taken his posture on a large, sea-worm boulder, arose and held up his hands for silence.

"With us are certain godless ones. We will spare their lives but there is no need to associate with them. I order the spacemen to march immediately to the north end of the island. We will not communicate with them or have any dealings with them. I warn them on pain of death to stay to themselves, Spacemen, march!"

Jan and the others trudged down the beach. As they left the group Jimpson grinned insolently.

"You'll pay for that grin," Jan whispered.

They had not marched more than two miles up the beach when they heard the sound of blasters. They looked back and saw hundreds of the great birds rising from the trees. Other hundreds joined them as they wheeled northward. The sky above them was filled with the rush of frightened wings and low, throaty whimpers of terror. Then a dozen birds turned back and began to fly low over the treetops.

"I'll bet those are spies," Jan told his spacemen.

They marched on until the brief arctic night came. Then, weary with excitement and fatigue, they dropped to the beach.

"I'm sorry, men," Jan said. "I hoped we would be able to outwit them some way, but it looks like the Mohcans have licked us. However, I'm just as glad we weren't present when they shot the birds. Those creatures are believed to be highly intelligent."

"What do you call them, chief?"

"The books refer to them as Species X-78 because no naturalist has ever made a study of their habits. Spacemen call them lovebirds or loverbirds because they can talk and because they're very affectionate with each other. When I was here before they learned to talk to us in no time at all. They're not real birds. They're life-bearing-like mammals but don't nurse their young."

As a matter of discipline, Jan posted a guard although he felt confident that the Mohcans were at least as exhausted as the spacemen. He had slept for only an hour or two when the man on watch woke him.

"Here's one of the birds to talk to you, captain."

It was very light. There were three full moons in the sky and the sky was reddening toward dawn.

The lovebird was a giant cock with bright red wing tips.

"I remember you, spaceman, from the other time you were here. I was a young fellow then but I can still talk." He spoke carefully in a low, cooing manner.

"You are friends, aren't you? The ones in white are enemies. They killed and ate three of us. We never heard of intelligent beings eating each other."

"We are friends, and the ones in white are our enemies," Jan said.

"You will be happy, then, if we destroy them?"

"I will be very happy. But how will you do it? Remember, they have very dangerous weapons. We have none."

"First we must learn about them. Tell us all you know. Then we will spy on them for a long time."

Jan told him all that he knew of the Mohcans as individuals and as a sect. The sun was well up when he finished. The bird leaped into the air with a long musical cry as piercing as a trumpet call. In a few moments hundreds of birds settled about them with fruit and fish in their claws.

"We will help you to live, and, in return, you and your men must teach all of us your language."

For three weeks Jan and his men lived idly on the beach without turning a hand for food. They made friends with the birds and taught them language. In return, the birds taught them of the ways of the planet. Neither birds nor spacemen went near the Mohcans except for small groups of winged spies.

"THE Mohcans are doing well," the red-winged chief reported. "They are catching fish and they know what fruit is good. Every morning and evening they come together on the beach and sing."

Then, several days later, the bird chief said to Jan, "Tonight we attack. There will be no moons for several hours."

"What will you do?"

"Listen and learn."

"If you can, spare the woman named Sister Ellen."



"I promise nothing, but we will try."

As the sun sank, the sky was suddenly filled with a great rhythm of wings. For a quarter of an hour there was silence. Then there began a song with a sensual quality to it, a low, sad insistent yearning. It became stronger, more determined, more vibrant with urgency. Jan thought of all the women he had had and of those he had longed to have, and finally the dream woman who existed on none of the worlds but only in his own mind.

And then the music shifted, and he began to hate the men who had taken women away from him and the women he could never have because of the men who had them.

Suddenly there was a blow and a shout of pain in the darkness, and Jan could dimly see two spacemen fighting, an almost unheard of thing among those men conditioned and disciplined to comradeship. Jan leaped between them. They had their hands clenched on each other's throats and it was not easy to separate them.

"What's the matter with you, Smith? Have you gone crazy, Knorsky?" Jan shouted.

"It's that dame on Tartarus, Captain. He stole her from me."

Jan remembered the dame, a sloe-eyed little spaceman's tart. Smith and Knorsky had placed playful bets on who would have her first. Smith won, and Knorsky paid with a laugh. They were the best of friends.

"Calm down, you guys—" Jan started to say. Suddenly there was a rattle of blaster fire. A moment's silence was followed by more shots. Then random shots with decreasing frequency. The bird song had ceased completely.

Then a long silence broken by a sound like laughter. It grew wilder and wilder. Then it came north on wings. The birds settled on the beach and in the forest. The red-winged chief strutted beside Jan.

"It was easy to do, spacecaptain," the bird said. "We watched them until we understood how many longed for each other's mates. Then we drove the men to women who did not belong to them and the women to the men. Then we turned to the foolishness of jealousy. There are 27

men and seven women less. There now remain 10 men and 23 women."

"Is the woman named Ellen all right?"

"Yes. She stayed on her knees throughout the fight and no one touched her."

At sundown the next evening the bird chief said, "Perhaps we will complete our victory tonight."

Jan made his men stuff medical cotton in their ears. It was a wise precaution. The bird song, muted by the cotton was one of pure hate and the desire for vengeance. Jan remembered that he was a captain and that his men might have cause to resent his discipline. He crept quietly away and hid in the woods.

And at last came the sound of blasters, burst after burst in the clear night air. And then silence, followed by the wild thunder of bird laughter.

"The black one was the first to act," the bird chief said. "He killed the one called the Prophet in a terrible manner, burning off his arms and legs with the blaster."

"Then someone killed the black man, and after that there was a general battle. The foolish spaceman named Jimpson tried to dig a hole in the sand, but 20 of us flew down and picked him up and carried him out to sea. He could not swim. There are now no men and 20 women left, including your woman called Ellen."

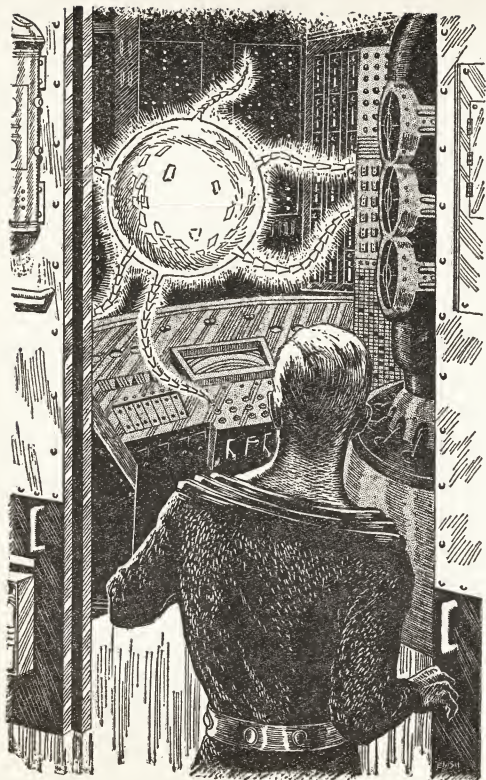
The next evening the birdsong did not begin until two moons arose. It was pleasant, calm, full of promise. Without any discussion the spacemen started to walk south along the beach. They had not gone far when they saw the Mohcan women walking toward them. Both parties began to run.

Jan held Ellen in his arms. "I thought it was a sin, what I was feeling for you. Now I know it isn't. The birds are telling us that it isn't, aren't they, darling?"

For answer, Jan kissed her.

Later he talked to all of them. "There are 14 men and 20 women," he said. "There will be polygamy, but there must be no jealousy. We must work everything out reasonably."

"You will be reasonable," the bird chief said. "We have songs which will make you be reasonable."



# WHAT INHABITS ME?

By ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS

*What vast secrets would it hold? What startling discoveries . . . what dire news would it bring back after twenty lost years out in deep space? Fearfully men watched the awesome Andromeda glide into the Plutonian spaceport.*

HERE the universe was so quiet you could hear space creaking and groaning from its internal stresses. Here even the far-off stars seemed to roar like blow torches.

Craig Randall, shivering from the cold of the observatory dome, snapped shut the holders on the exposed plates, pulled them out and quickly replaced them with new ones, opened the shutters on the 20-inch scope. Out here on Pluto a 20-inch telescope did a much better job than a 200-inch scope did on Earth. This was one reason why Earth

Government maintained this station here on a wandering chunk of space-frozen rock.

Plates in hand, he fled into the semi-warmth of the development lab. Here he developed them, compared them with previous plates, saw there was no change, and quickly filed them. Then he fled again, this time to the warmth of human companionship in the big lounge of Pluto Station.

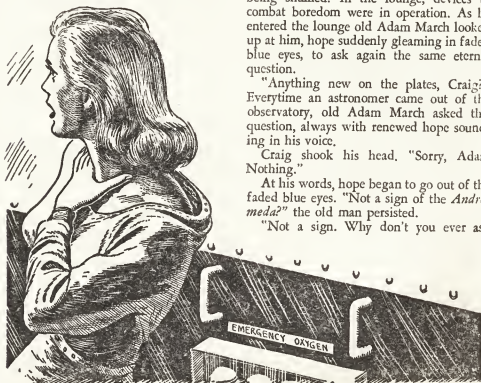
Music from Earth came to him as he entered the room, warm and throbbing, smells, tobacco smoke, the rattle of a pin-ball machine, the ruffle of a deck of cards being shuffled. In the lounge, devices to combat boredom were in operation. As he entered the lounge old Adam March looked up at him, hope suddenly gleaming in faded blue eyes, to ask again the same eternal question.

"Anything new on the plates, Craig?" Everytime an astronomer came out of the observatory, old Adam March asked this question, always with renewed hope sounding in his voice.

Craig shook his head. "Sorry, Adam Nothing."

At his words, hope began to go out of the faded blue eyes. "Not a sign of the *Andromeda*?" the old man persisted.

"Not a sign. Why don't you ever ask



about the *Perseus* or the *Hercules*? They went out into deep space too, you know."

"I know," Adam March nodded. "But the *Andromeda* was the first one to go out, she was the first deep-space ship. It seems logical that she might be the first one back. That's why I always ask about her."

"She went out twenty years ago," Craig said, then caught himself. Whatever it was that the old man sought in the *Andromeda*, there was no point in reminding him that the ship had unquestionably smashed up long ago. Let hope remain! "Sorry, Adam. Nothing, yet."

"They might not catch her until she was real close in," Adam March persisted. "She wouldn't be using her drive until she got in real close and you probably wouldn't catch her until the drive was turned on. Let me know, will you, if you catch anything?" The last was said quickly as Craig Randall began to move away.

"Sure thing, Adam, you'll be the first to know," Craig answered. Across the room, Mary Kirkman was trying to catch his eye, a needless effort in this case. If she was in sight, she always had his eye. She also had the eye of every other male in her vicinity, a quality which occasionally gave Craig the impulse to destroy half the unmarried men at the station. She was a bio-physicist, and a good one. She was assigned to the bio-physical research laboratories that were a part of the station. Mary pulled him down to the sofa beside her.

"Craig, we're going to get a whole new bio-physics lab here." Excitement danced in her voice and glinted in her eyes.

"That's fine," Craig said. He knew how much this meant to her. "How do you know?"

"The chief just got the news from Mr. Nuoy," Mary Kirkham answered.

"NUOY. Oh." Craig's voice dropped a notch as Nuoy's name came into the conversation. He felt his mood shift. "If Nuoy has approved it, of course it will go through. He's got enough pull to get special quarters constructed for him here, at the expense of Earth Government, so he can have the advantages of living under a light gravity. But he never considers that two billion humans scattered through the Solar

System have kicked in with taxes so that he can enjoy life." Bitterness crept into his voice as he spoke. "What are you going to do in your new bio-physics lab—find a way to make Nuoy virile?"

"Craig!" She was hurt at what he said. "You're spreading rumor!"

"Of course," he agreed. What he had said was rumor, without substantiation and without proof. If anyone had been careless enough to try to prove such rumors, the results would have been unpleasant for the investigator. Officially there was no connection between Nuoy and Pluto Station, or between Nuoy and Earth Government. But at high official levels, in wire pulling that went on so far above the heads of the average man as to be beyond his comprehension, there was little doubt that Nuoy owned Pluto Station, and a big chunk of the Solar System as well.

"I hope you're wrong, Craig," the girl said, seriously. "I would hate to think we have such monsters as that riding on the back of all of us."

"I hope I'm wrong too. But I'm afraid I'm not."

"Randall!" the public address system broke in. "Craig Randall. Come to the main observation dome at once, please."

"The military calls," Craig said, rising. "Us lesser mortals must obey."

The military ran Pluto Station, manned it, supplied it, armed it, and used it as a base for keeping watch for mythical intruders who might come wandering into the system from the far-off seas of space. There was not a scientist in the station who did not feel deep in his bones that the military could be dispensed with, that they wasted much money and time keeping watch for non-existent pirates from the depths of space. But the military insisted that this watch was important. Sure, there was peace now, but there might not always be peace. Who knew what monsters might come in from the sea that had no other shore? If space was infinite, the danger might be infinite also. So argued the military. Earth Government backed them up to the extent of manning its planet station with armed forces. On Mars and Venus, they were needed. But here on Pluto what was needed was a way to keep from freezing.

"Probably one of the lieutenants has spotted me down here with you and is trying to get me up to the main dome to look at a meteor while he sneaks down here and makes passes at you."

"Darling, I believe you're jealous. In that case I'll go with you."

"Good," Craig said, vastly pleased.

They used the elevator to the top of the big building. A lieutenant, his face serious, was waiting for them at the landing. He led them into the top dome.

Above them, through the plastic cover, a million stars sparkled. Seen through airless space, the stars were so brilliant they seemed to be just outside the dome. Pluto Station itself was set in the middle of a vast valley, with low hills surrounding it. On the left, were frozen runways extending the length of the valley. Then ended in the vast hump of the huge dome that served as a hangar for the space ships landing on Pluto. The hangar itself was part of the cluster of buildings that made up the station.

Up above the rocky surface of Pluto, slanting downward toward the runways, was a pale blue glow.

"Hell, that's not a meteor!" Craig gasped. "That's a ship coming in from deep space for a landing here."

"That's what I thought," the lieutenant answered. "But I wanted one of you astronomy boys to make a positive identification for me before I aroused the whole station." With one hand, the lieutenant pushed the button marked *Call to Action Stations*. With his other hand, he snapped open the inter-communication line that led directly to the office of Cyrus Stanley, commanding general of Pluto Station.

The long watch of the military was finally paying off. Life was coming in from the void to them. The entire station awakened to the sudden violent jangle of alarm bells.

The military had everything prepared for a situation such as this. Plan A went into operation at once. This plan called for the manning of the powerful Z beams mounted not only in the station but in the low hills surrounding the vast valley. The same power that had made possible the conquest of space had also made possible the building of weapons strong enough to annihilate the targets against which they were directed.

Guided by radar, the Z beams began tracking the incoming ship.

However, Plan A called for the peaceful reception of the visiting ship, if that were possible. Life coming in from the vast void of space was too important to be destroyed if there was any way to make contact with it and to establish peaceful relations. A race that could come across deep space itself probably had enough power at its disposal to warrant cautious and careful handling.

As the alarm bells went into action, radio beams leaped out, attempting contact with the ship. No reply was expected for any reply that came would be a meaningless jumble of sounds. No one knew what a deep-space tongue would sound like. But the attempt was a part of Plan A, and it was made.

With the jangle of the alarm, a sudden flurry of anticipation ran through the whole station. Deep in his heart every man here hoped that some day life might come in from across the void, ending the utter loneliness of the Solar System. Sol and his attendant planets might encompass a fairly large area of space, but this area was microscopically small in comparison to the vastness of the universe. The human race was hungry for contact with another life form.

In his quarters General Stanley hastily donned his jacket.

In his private suite of rooms Meyer Nuoy heard the alarm. Here, the jangle of the bells was a thin whisper of pleasant sound, suited to his sensitive ears. He stirred restlessly in the padded contour chair that had been specially made to fit his body. Irritation rose in him. He hadn't given permission for an alarm to be sounded. He picked up the private phone beside his chair.

"Stanley?" His voice was a growl.

"Why, yes, Mr. Nuoy," the general hastily answered.

"What's all this clatter about?"

"A ship is coming in, Mr. Nuoy."

"What of it? Ships land regularly, don't they? Is this any reason to disturb us with alarm bells?"

"But this ship is not coming in from Earth. It's coming in from deep space."

"Oh!" Nuoy was so startled by this news that he dropped the cigar he was smoking. As he slapped at the coal, the general took

the opportunity to hang up. When he got the cigar slapped out and discovered that the general had hung up, Nuoy was infuriated.

"I'll have that stupid fool transferred to Venus!" he thundered.

The general had had good reason for hanging up. Suddenly, an aide had entered with the astonishing news that this ship was responding to radio contact, and that the ship's operator was speaking English.

"Hell on wheels, do they know English in deep space?" the general gasped.

UP IN the dome, Craig Randall and Mary Kirkham watched the glows move through the sky as the ship approached. They could hear the clatter of voices coming from the radio room as contact was attempted. Suddenly a new voice came from the loud speaker in the radio room.

"Calling Pluto Station? Calling Pluto Station? Go ahead, please."

They heard the startled operator gasp as he caught his breath. "Holy cats, the ship is talking back to me! This boat is not coming in from deep space, not unless they speak English out there too!"

"Correction, please," the loud speaker answered. "This ship is coming from deep space."

"But—but—but—"

"This is the *Andromeda* returning to the Solar System after twenty years in space. Contact your commanding officer immediately and advise him that we are preparing to land."

"Whoops!" Craig Randall shouted. "The *Andromeda*!"

The Solar System, like a vast ark riding the flood of infinity, had sent doves into deep space. After twenty years, after all hope had been given up, one of the doves was returning.

The jangling of the alarm bells went into quick silence as the startled station prepared itself to welcome the wanderer home. Home, after years between the stars, home after wandering the vastness of deep space itself.

The Z-weapons in their hidden emplacements left off their tracking of this visitor and the whole station turned itself from an armed camp into a jubilant reception committee.

The *Andromeda* came down to the runway, the vast outer doors of the hangar swung ponderously open, and the *Andromeda* came to a halt at Pluto Station. From the waiting humans came the sound of a tremendous cheer. A sloping runway was run up to the main lock of the *Andromeda*. The lock opened. A tall man, dressed in light shorts and a shirt, appeared in the lock. He was bronzed and lean and he looked thoroughly fit. The only mark of authority on him was on the tattered cap that he wore. The stars of a captain glittered there.

His voice was deep, like a bell. "I am Captain Martin of the *Andromeda*," he said.

As he spoke, the cheer grew to a thunderous volume of sound.

General Stanley advanced. He and Captain Martin shook hands. Still shaking hands, they moved down the runway and disappeared in the direction of Nuoy's quarters.

In the throng, Craig caught a glimpse of Adam March. The old man had been in the very first line had been cheering himself hoarse. When Captain Martin had emerged, old Adam had stopped cheering. The old man had stared at the captain as if he did not believe his eyes, then he had seemed to shrink in upon himself, to become small and unimportant.

Then the crew came out of the lock. They were lean and bronzed, they looked to be in perfect physical and mental health. As the last one emerged, the lock swung ponderously shut behind them. The cheering grew to a volume of sound that shook the I-beams of the vast hangar. The members of the crew were taken immediately to the big lounge of the station. Beer began to flow in vast quantities.

"I am sure Mr. Nuoy will want to hear what you have to say," General Stanley said, over and over again, as he and Captain Martin moved away from the ship. The general was a little uneasy because he had hung up on Nuoy. Unless amends were made, he anticipated possible retaliation. To the general's surprise, they were admitted instantly to Nuoy's quarters. Nuoy seemed not to remember that the general had hung up on him. When Captain Martin was introduced, Nuoy's face showed great pleasure. Nuoy had a kind of compelling magnetism about him. When he chose, he could be a



completely gracious host. All of his personal magnetism was turned on now. He ordered fine wines and foods to be brought immediately. Servants hurried to obey him. Soft music began to pour from speakers in the walls. Hidden jets began to blow pleasant perfumes into the room.

Stanley had rarely been here, mere generals did not often get a chance to enter Nuoy's private quarters. He was always surprised at the pleasure dome vastly more heavenly than any ever decreed by Kubla Khan in Asia existing here on the ice world of Pluto. Captain Martin gasped in frank surprise. He gingerly tasted the wines and the foods, his manner indicating that he was not quite certain that he was supposed to consume such delicacies. Under Nuoy's urging, he tasted everything, apparently with growing enjoyment.

"Now tell us what you discovered among the stars," Nuoy said.

"We made first landfall on a planet which we named Star Goal," Captain Martin said. Leaning back in his chair, he began to talk. General Stanley and Nuoy listened first in surprise, then in growing amazement, then in startled bewilderment.

IN THE big lounge, every man who could be spared from duty or who could manage to sneak away from his assigned post, welcomed the crew of the *Andromeda*. Beer flowed by the gallons. Vast quantities of pretzels and hamburgers were consumed, largely by the staff of the station. The crew of the *Andromeda* tasted food and drink cautiously, in the manner of men long unaccustomed to the modest comforts of civilized life.

"Poor creatures, they probably haven't had a decent meal in years," Mary Kirkham said, indignantly.

"Nor a chance to bury their snoots in a can of beer," Craig added. "But when are we going to get the story of what they found out, what they discovered, and what happened to them. Hey, George!" he spoke to the nearest *Andromeda* man. "Where did you land?"

"Sorry, Craig," the man answered, smiling. "You'll have to get your information from Captain Martin."

"Damn the captain!" Craig said. "We

want to know."

"I understand that," George answered. "But we got orders not to talk. Wait until we've been cleared. We'll give you the whole story."

"But that means you'll have to go to Earth first and we'll get all the information second hand," Mary protested.

The man spread his hand. "Sorry, I didn't make the rules."

The staff of the station became quite indignant when it became obvious that they were not going to get any information from the crew.

"You might try making love to one of them," Craig said, in exasperation, to Mary.

"I might at that," she answered. "They all look kind of cute to me."

"Then try making love to all of them," Craig said bitterly. "They'd probably like it. It's been twenty years since they saw a woman. You'd have the time of your life."

"Kindly restrict your allusions," Mary snapped, coloring.

Craig grinned. "You're a bio-physicist. None of the facts of life are supposed to be allusions to a bio-physicist."

"I'll think it over," March said, darkly.

"Where's old Adam March?" Craig said suddenly. "Have you seen him?"

"Not since the ship landed," Mary answered. "He was up in the front line cheering himself hoarse. Why?"

"For years he has been asking about the *Andromeda*. From the interest he took in the ship you would think he owned it. Now the ship has arrived, but he's not here taking part in the celebration." Mild concern rose in him as he sensed something wrong in the old man's absence. "I'm going to find him."

Asking questions, he discovered no one had seen Adam March. He went directly to the old man's quarters. The door was closed. He rapped. There was no answer. He tried the knob.

The door was locked.

"Who is it?" a voice quavered from inside.

"Craig Randall. Open up."

There was a moment's hesitation, then the door opened a crack. March peered through the opening. It seemed to Craig that the old man had aged years in hours. He had a heavy monkey wrench in one hand.



"What's wrong?" Craig said. "The *Andromeda* is in?"

The old man opened the door. "Come in," he said. "Yes, the *Andromeda* is in. That's what's wrong."

"What?"

March gestured in the direction of the hangar. "There's something wrong in that ship."

"Why do you say that?"

"I have my reasons."

"But what makes you think so? What proof? If you know what you are talking about—"

March recoiled at the words. "I knew you would think I did not know what I was talking about."

"I'm sorry, Adam, I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. But you've got to have some proof." He hesitated, as a sudden thought struck him. "Or . . . maybe you ought to drop in on one of the station doctors in the morning. Maybe you've got a touch of space sickness. You've been here on Pluto pretty long."

The old man recoiled even more. He clutched the wrench. "Leave me alone, Craig," he said harshly. "Go away from me. I don't want to talk to you."

Craig had no choice except to leave. The lock clicked in the door. He hunted up Mary. "I'm going to take a look at the *Andromeda*. Want to come along?"

The expression on his face must have revealed what he was thinking. Her answer was quick. "Of course. But what's wrong?"

"I don't know, Adam thinks something is wrong but he won't talk." He explained what the old man had said.

Her face fell. "I'm afraid you're right. It does sound an awful lot like space sickness. I'm so sorry. He's such a nice old man."

"Maybe I'm wrong. We'll go check."

IN THE dimly lighted hangar the ship dwarfed them, made them pygmies in comparison to its huge bulk. No guard over the ship had been established by the station. No guard was ever established over the ships that landed here. None was needed. They went slowly around the ship. The stout metal of the hull showed the pitting of meteoric dust that had gotten through the screens. On the bow, pitted and faded but

still easily readable, was the word—*Andromeda*.

"Were you questioning that this is actually the *Andromeda*?" Mary asked.

"Not questioning, just checking." He moved to the slanting ramp that led upward to the lock from which the crew had emerged, stared at it. "It's odd that the lock should be closed."

Usually ships in the hangar opened all locks, exchanging their many-times-used air for the cleaner air of the station. They went up the ramp. "If they left a guard, maybe he will open up for us," Craig said. There was no opening in the lock but he knew that an observer inside could detect their presence there.

"Open up," he said.

"What for?" a voice answered.

Craig jumped. The voice seemed to speak from the empty air beside him.

"Don't be startled," the voice said. "This is a simple communication mechanism for transmitting voice tones. All space ships have them."

"All—" Craig caught himself. He had started to say that no space ship had such a device, that he had never heard of a method of transmitting a voice through a steel hull.

"What do you want?" the voice said.

"We want to talk."

"Talk to Captain Martin."

"This is hardly a matter for the captain. There's a party inside. We thought perhaps you would like to join it. Your friends are having themselves a whale of a time. We came to take over the duties of anyone who remained in the ship so you can join them," Craig said, hastily improvising.

"And while you are on duty, you would explore the ship! Is that your plan?"

"What?" Craig gasped. His first dazed thought was that his mind was being read.

"Well, of all things!" Mary said, her voice hot. "Is there something to hide inside the ship?"

"Of course not!" For an instant, the voice sounded startled. Then it quickly became the voice of a book salesman, suavely peddling holy literature. "Your commanding officer will have an opportunity to examine the ship, if he wishes!"

"Then why did you say we would explore the ship?" Mary continued. "If there is

nothing to hide, what difference does it make whether or not we explore it?"

"Captain Martin would have my head if I let you take my place without orders. Sorry. I can be relieved only on orders from him." The voice lost its suavity and became stiff and hard.

"Okay," Craig said. "Come on, Mary. Let's go back and join the party."

Her face indicated she was inclined to continue this discussion but she followed him down the ramp. At the bottom, she spoke quickly, "Craig, you're scared. What's wrong?"

"Nothing that I can put my finger on. It's mostly Adam March. He saw something that he didn't like but he wouldn't talk about it. Now, we run into a closed lock, and a guard with a gimmick that he can use to talk through the wall of the ship. Space ships never post a guard here, they never keep the locks closed. Why is the *Andromeda* doing it?"

"I don't know," Mary answered, hesitantly. "I don't like it either. I keep getting a feeling that something is wrong but I don't know what."

"Walk back up the ramp!" the voice spoke from the air.

Both jumped. "What kind of a pick-up system are you using that can detect our voices at this distance?" Craig demanded.

"A very efficient one. Walk up the ramp. And don't try running! You'll run straight into a dead man if you do."

"Where's a dead man?" Craig gasped.

"You'll be the dead man!" the voice answered. "Walk up the ramp!"

They walked up the inclined runway. Ahead of them, the lock opened. They entered. It swung shut behind them. Ahead, the inner door opened.

For the first time, they saw the source of the voice that had spoken to them. Craig felt every muscle in his body contract. Mary uttered a scream that was pure panic.

IN NUOY'S quarters Captain Martin was finishing with his story of what they had found on Star Goal. General Stanley was almost falling out of his chair as he leaned forward to listen. Nuoy's lips were opening and closing and he was breathing in panting gasps. A slobbering sound was coming

from within his throat.

"There is no doubt but that the inhabitants of Star Goal are immortal," Captain Martin finished.

Nuoy swallowed. He swallowed again and again. A gleam came into his eyes.

"Can you prove that statement, Martin?" he demanded.

"Of course!" the captain calmly answered. Nuoy almost fell out of his chair at the words. He had expected argument, hedging, perhaps compromise. In the world he knew, men told lies to each other, then told other lies to get out of the first ones they had told. As golden as Captain Martin's statement was, Nuoy had thought it was a lie, that there was a catch in it somewhere. He had expected the captain to try to lie out of it. He hardly knew what to do when the captain did not try to lie.

"I would like to see your proof," Nuoy finally spoke.

"You're looking at some of it," Captain Martin answered.

"Eh? You? What kind of proof is that?"

"If you will check the records, you will discover that I was 32 years old when the *Andromeda* left the Solar System. I am now 52 years of age. If you doubt what your own eyes tell you about my physical condition, I suggest you have your doctors examine me."

"They have worked on you. They have made you immortal?"

"They have worked on the whole crew."

"They did?" Nuoy gasped. "How much did they charge?"

"Nothing," Captain Martin answered.

"What? No charge?" Nuoy sounded as if he did not believe his ears.

"No charge," the captain repeated.

"Uh—uh!" Nuoy opened his mouth, closed it, made up his mind, opened his mouth again. "We'll have to change that," he said.

It was Captain Martin's turn to be surprised. "I don't understand you."

Nuoy was on his feet, making plans. "You and your ship will return to Star Goal immediately. I will accompany you." The slurping sounds in his throat were plainly audible.

"Eh?" the captain said.

Nuoy nodded firmly. "We will leave

within two hours, as quickly as you can stock the ship and as soon as my servants can transfer my things to the vessel."

Captain Martin glanced out of the corner of his eyes at General Stanley. The general looked in the other direction. "What about Earth Government?"

"The government will authorize your return to Star Goal," Nuoy said, his voice sharp. "They're in my vest pocket."

Again Martin glanced at Stanley. This time the general did not look away. Pain showed on his face but he made no attempt to deny Nuoy's statement.

"But why are we going back to Star Goal in such a rush?" Martin spoke.

"Don't be stupid, Martin," Nuoy answered. "If there is immortality to be had anywhere in the universe, I intend to have it. Later, we will establish a regular traffic between the Solar System and Star Goal. I know a great many men around the system who will pay handsomely for the privilege of visiting this planet you have discovered. We won't be such fools as to give immortality away."

General Stanley managed to find his voice. "Perhaps Captain Martin does not wish to return immediately. After all, he and his men have been gone twenty years. They may have old friends they wish to see—"

"Captain Martin will take orders," Nuoy said crisply. "Just like you do, Stanley."

The general was silent.

THE creature facing Craig and Mary was seated behind an elaborate control panel that was set in an alcove in the wall of the corridor leading into the ship. Craig Randall knew enough about space ships to know that no such alcove belonged here. He did not need to know anything about space ships to know that the creature in the alcove did not belong there. Nor did it belong anywhere in the Solar System.

His first dazed impression was that the creature was made of metal; it had a metallic sheen about it. His second impression was that the creature was composed of many kinds of crystals of a color varying all the ways from infra red to ultra violet. The crystals seemed to be in rapid vibration. A glow like an aura came from it and the colors

changed very rapidly.

The creature was round, two feet in diameter. Appendages of linked crystals extended to the controls on the panel. Apparently these appendages could be extruded and withdrawn at will. As Craig stared, an appendage was withdrawn from the control panel and another was extended from the circular body. If it had eyes, they were not visible, it if had ears, he could not see them. There was no mouth, no nose, there was only this globe of shining pulsing crystals.

"Where—where is the man we were talking to?" Craig whispered. In his mind was still the lingering thought that they had spoken to a man.

"You were talking to me. A slight orange pulsation passed over the crystals as the voice came.

"Who—who—"

"I am Filo of the Sorodromes," the voice answered. The crystals glowed with a deep red color as if being Filo of the Sorodromes was a great thing. "Why did you think something was wrong in the ship?"

"Well—"

"Speak the facts. Have you humans grown suspicious?"

"Suspicious of what?"

"Of the existence of the Sorodromes. Has some member of the crew revealed our existence?" The globe showed a violent green at the question.

"No," Craig answered. "Not so far as I know."

"Then why did you think something was wrong?"

"It wasn't that we *knew* something was wrong."

"You are in a position where lying will do you no good. What is happening inside the station? Are our controls failing?"

"What controls? Do you mean that you can control the crew of the *Andromeda* from here?"

"What do you think?" Filo answered. "If there had been any important loss of control, I would have known about it. But there may have been hints, attempts to convey information, which I did not catch. Have there been such attempts?"

Before Craig could answer another voice was whispering in the air, calling urgently, "Great Filo? Please contact me immedi-

ately." The voice was a thin whisper of sound, as if somewhere a man was thinking and his thoughts were being built up to audible volume.

"Yes," Filo answered, "What is it?"

"Nuoy insists on coming aboard the ship. Please instruct me."

"Who is Nuoy?"

"He seems to think he is the top dog in the System."

"What does he want?"

"I have told him a part of the story of Star Goal and that the race which lives on Star Goal possesses immortality. He insists on returning immediately to Star Goal to obtain immortality for himself. After that he plans to establish a regular traffic between Star Goal and the Solar System to peddle immortality to those rich enough to pay for it." A faint repugnance sounded in the whisper.

Filo digested this information. The color coming from his was almost pure white. He seemed to be vibrating at a tremendously high frequency.

"I await your orders," the whisper came again. "Shall I bring him aboard the ship?"

"I am considering the matter."

"He is very impatient. Please instruct me immediately."

"I must confer with my fellows," Filo answered. "I will have an answer for you in minutes."

"Yes, Great Filo," the voice whispered.

Filo was silent behind the control panel. Craig had the impression that some wordless conference was taking place with other Sorodromes located elsewhere. He stared at Mary in growing horror.

"That whisper was coming from Captain Martin," the girl whispered. "He is the only person from the *Andromeda* who is with Mr. Nuoy. And that means—"

"It means that Captain Martin and the crew are not in charge of this ship."

"And that means—"

"That something latched on to the crew of the *Andromeda* on this planet they call Star Goal. It means that the ship's landing here was a ruse to get into Pluto Station, maybe from here on into the whole Solar System!" His voice grew grim. "It means that the fate the military was always afraid of has finally come in upon us, and has gotten

under our guard. It means we have welcomed a race of monsters into Pluto Station. It means that Adam—How did Adam know that something was wrong?"

"Who is Adam?" Filo spoke.

"Just a man," Craig faltered.

"Ah—" Filo was apparently going to ask more questions but he was interrupted by the arrival of three other Sorodromes. Balls of glowing crystals, they came floating down the corridor from the interior of the ship. Energy seemed to flow from them. Craig felt his skin begin to itch and burn. The three conferred with Filo in a weird, wordless flow of communication between them. From the way their colors changed Craig had the impression that they were laughing at some secret joke of their own.

"Yes?" Captain Martin's voice whispered.

"Bring this human to us," Filo answered.

"We will accommodate him in his desire to return to Star Goal. We will also assist him to set up traffic between our planet and his system." Again the colors changed as laughter seemed to ripple through them.

"What if others want to come too?"

"Bring them to the number of twenty. Do they seem suspicious?"

"Not so far as I can tell. Nuoy is burning with impatience to be away. He insists we start loading the ship immediately."

"Then we must cooperate with him," Filo answered. Again the surge of color that was laughter surged through the Sorodromes. "Summon the crew to load and operate the ship. We will be ready when you arrive."

Filo extruded a tentacle, touched a control on the panel in front of him. A section of metal wall that had been folded back slid across the alcove, hiding it from sight.

"My three comrades will direct you," Filo's voice spoke from the empty air.

CRAIG and Mary found themselves being herded down the corridor. They turned a corner. A door leading into a storeroom was open. They were herded through the door. It closed behind them, leaving them in total darkness.

In that darkness was the soft sound of stealthy movement.

Captain Martin and Meyer Nuoy came through the lock. Nuoy was glow-

ing with eagerness.

As they passed through the lock Captain Martin glanced in the direction of an alcove that he knew was hidden there. The expression on his face was momentarily grim, but he said nothing.

"I'll take over your quarters, Captain Martin," Nuoy said. "Show me to them so I can have my servants bring my belongings to them and make the necessary changes as quickly as possible. Of course, I will want to bring my own wines and foods, and I will bring my own staff of servants with me, so I can have proper service on the trip. I understand the accommodations on the deep-space ships are not elaborate."

"Of course, Mr. Nuoy," Captain Martin answered.

If he resented Nuoy's words or actions, no trace of it showed on his face.

In the dark storeroom a voice hissed, "Who is it?"

"Adam!" Craig gasped. "It's us, Craig and Mary."

"Oh!" Craig heard Adam March breathe a sigh of relief. "It's a darned good thing you spoke up. I almost let you have it."

"How—how did you get into the ship?"

"Through one of the discharge locks. I was coming along the passage when I spotted you two coming. I didn't quite recognize you. What—what was them danged things floating through the air behind you?"

Craig explained about the Sorodromes.

"I knew it was something like that, or worse, though I don't know what the hell could be any worse! What are we going to do, Craig?"

"What *can* we do?" Craig answered, desperation in his voice. "We've got a military force here that is supposed to take care of creatures like these—"

"Only, sometimes, it turns out that the ordinary citizens have got to do the job the military was supposed to do, but didn't!" Bitterness sounded in March's voice. "This is A deck, isn't it, the lowest deck in the ship?"

"I suppose so. I don't know how many decks the *Andromeda* has."

"Hmmm. And this storage room they've got us caught in is just inside the main lock, isn't it. You come in through the main lock and go straight down the passage and

turn to the left and you're here. Isn't that right?"

"I—I hardly noticed," Craig answered. He didn't add that he had too many other things to think about to notice where they were being taken.

"That's right," Mary answered.

"If this is A deck—" the old man muttered. They heard him move away. In the darkness he stumbled over a box and apologized to Mary for the profanity. "Swear all you please, Adam," the girl said. "I'll swear with you, if that will help. What are you trying to do?"

A light flared as the old man struck a match. He was down on his knees against the far bulkhead. The match went out, Adam grunted, Metal scraped in the darkness, thudded on the floor. A square opening was revealed. Dim light came through it. Grunting with satisfaction, Adam crawled through it. "Come on, you two," his voice came from the other side.

They crawled through the opening and found themselves in what was obviously one of the main holds. Adam March, the monkey wrench gripped firmly in his hand, grinned at them.

"How did you know that opening was there?" Craig demanded.

"I kind of sensed it would be there."

"Sensed, hell! It strikes me that you know a devil of a lot about the *Andromeda*. You knew how to get through a discharge port. You knew where this opening was."

The old man blinked guileless eyes at him. "Do I? I'm just lucky, I guess. We've got to figure out what we're going to do next."

"We'll get out of the ship and go straight to General Stanton," Mary said.

"And what will we do when we get to the general?" Craig asked. "Tell him about Filo and the Sorodromes? We'll get our heads examined by the station doctors. By the time they have finished with us, the ship will be gone. If anything is to be done, it has to be done right now."

"Why not let the ship go?" Mary argued. "All they've got is Nuoy and we can sure stand to part with him?"

"And have the Sorodromes come back at us, later, with all his power on their side? Think again, Mary."

"But surely the general—"

"I'm afraid Craig's about right, Mary," old Adam interposed. "The general is not a bad guy and he's not thick-headed, but he would need some kind of evidence, something in the way of proof, before he would believe any story we told him."

"The evidence is in an alcove just inside the main lock. I can point it out to him."

"Yes, but who's going to pry Filo out of there?" Craig answered. "I've got a hunch that Filo is not exactly helpless. If we break in on him, all hell may break loose."

THE door of the hold opened. A voice ordered, "Dump those boxes in here, men."

They moved as if they had one mind, taking refuge behind the remnants of stores that were still in the hold. Directed by a member of the crew, a file of men entered, dumped their loads and trotted out.

"Grab a box," Craig whispered. "We'll walk out of here. If anybody questions us, we're stowing cargo."

Each carrying a box, no one challenged them.

"I want to go to the main control room," Adam whispered. "I've got an idea."

"Do you know the way?"

"Sure. Follow the ramps up." The old man moved with a sure stride toward an inclined runway. They followed. Again Craig was struck with the realization that Adam was very familiar with the ship. He led them upward as if he knew exactly where he was going.

The crew moved along the corridors, preparing the ship for flight. They seemed unperturbed by this sudden order to return to deep space. They paid no attention to the three Pluto Station people who were carrying boxes up the ramps.

No Sorodromes were in sight.

"They're all in their hidey-holes," Adam March muttered.

As they reached the landing on C deck, Captain Martin was coming out of the quarters directly across from them. "I'm sure everything will be all right," Captain Martin said to someone inside the quarters.

"It had better be," Nuoy's voice came from inside.

6—PLANET—March

Martin came directly toward them, Craig had the impression that Adam tried to turn his face toward the wall. Captain Martin glanced at the old man. A startled expression flitted across his features. His mouth opened, he started to speak. Then he seemed to change his mind very quickly. He went past them as if he had never seen them.

As if a ghost were after him, Adam went up the last inclined ramp to D deck.

The main control room was before them. They entered it, found it empty. Above them, through the tough plastic of the observation dome, they could see the girders of the hangar. All around them were the controls by which the ship was directed in flight. In the middle of the room, with all controls in easy reach, was a single huge chair. It was the control center of the ship. Off in small rooms around the control room were plotting centers where the position of the ship in space was mapped. In one small room was a large three-dimensional globe of the heavens.

The crew had not yet arrived in the control room.

Adam dropped his box, went quickly around the control, stopped in front of the big chair, touched it, touched the controls with gentle fingers. He seemed almost entranced by what he was seeing here.

"This is the heart of the whole ship," he mused. "Everything is controlled from here. Power generation, power routing and supply, the auxiliary drives, the main drives, the steering drives—"

"Are you interested in the control room?" a voice spoke behind them.

Adam spun, his hand grabbing for the wrench in his pocket. Captain Martin stood just inside the doorway. There was a smile on his face but his eyes were fathomless.

"Uh, dang it, where did you come from?"

"I'll be glad to show it to you," the captain continued. "Of course, we don't have much time at the moment. Are you going to take the long hop with us?" Polite interest sounded in the voice but under the interest Craig sensed a seething emotional state.

"Why, uh, hadn't thought about it. Yes, we'll take the long hop if we get the chance," Adam answered. He looked like

a man in a fog groping desperately for some familiar landmark.

Smiling, Captain Martin moved to him. "This is the control chair, sir. The operator of the ship sits here. Information is relayed to him—" Swiftly he explained the use of all of the controls. Then his voice dropped to a whisper. "You haven't a chance to lick the Sorodromes. I've tried for years, all of us have tried, and we have failed! Forget it!" His voice rose again to normal tones. Politely he continued his explanations of the operation of the controls. "I'll have plenty of time to explain everything to you on the long hop," he ended.

"But—lad—" the old man's voice was a pleading whisper.

"You'll just get yourself killed," Captain Martin whispered. "Believe me. I know what I am talking about."

"Well—uh—Adam March seemed to choke up. 'What chance have we got on the long hop?' he whispered.

"Probably none," Captain Martin answered.

Adam's face worked. It twisted into a grimace as some inward torture passed through him. "Well . . . well, could . . ." His face lit up as if the inner turmoil had suddenly been resolved by some deep insight. "Could I stay here while the ship is taking off? Could I, Captain? I've always dreamed of being on the bridge of one of the deep-space ships like the *Andromeda* while she went free. . . . It'll be all right, won't it, Captain?" A pleading note crept into the voice. "I won't be in the way at all."

Martin frowned, then shrugged. "Well, all right. You understand that the crew will be busy with their duties?"

"Of course, Captain. I won't be in the way at all. You go on and take care of your duties. Have you got clearance papers from the general yet? Then you had better get them. Craig, you and Mary keep on lugging freight."

"Clearance papers?" Martin said, exasperation in his voice. "It's been so long since I've taken off from a Solar System port that—"

"The captain of the clearing ship has to apply in person for clearance papers," Adam said. "I mention it, because you might have forgot. That's the regulation."

"Damn!" Captain Martin said. "Well, if I must, I must."

MARY KIRKHAM and Craig Randall, the latter tremendously puzzled, were already leaving the control room. "I don't understand it," Craig was thinking, over and over again. "He knows too much—and seems to know too little—there's a play going on here that is over my head—" He shook his head, but he kept his thoughts to himself.

"What are we supposed to do, just go get more boxes?" Mary questioned.

"I don't know. Play along and wait for your cue. Something is going to happen."

"But I don't want to make the big hop. I don't want to go—" Her voice went into silence as Captain Martin fell into step beside them. The Captain's face was utterly blank. He walked like a man in a deep daze, like a zombie, like a man in a trance. Once his eyes flicked toward the wall. Following the direction in which the captain had glanced, Craig caught the vague outline of a door covering an alcove. Craig shuddered. Now he understood one reason why Captain Martin might be walking like a man in a trance. But were there other reasons?

It was obvious that the Sorodromes had almost perfect control over the captain and the crew.

They moved down the ramps. Members of the crew met them, saluted, continued with their duties. Men from the station were carrying supplies into the huge ship. They approached the main lock.

Craig Randall felt his flesh crawl as he saw the section of the wall that hid Filo of the Sorodromes. What if Filo was watching them? Craig kept his eyes fixed on the opposite wall. He was walking like a man in a trance himself, and he knew it. He held his breath, waiting for the challenge of the voice from the air. It did not come. They passed the hidden alcove; they passed through the lock; they were on the ramp outside. Craig's suddenly furious breathing shook his lean frame to the bones.

The bustle of the hangar was around them.

"Where will I get clearance?" Captain Martin muttered.

"Over there," Craig said, pointing.



2nd Lt.  
Joseph C. Rodriguez  
U.S. Army  
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They moved down the ramp. Craig stopped breathing again as a voice from the ship's inter-com system shouted from the lock behind them.

"ATTENTION, ALL HANDS."

The voice was an excellent imitation of Captain Martin. It spoke with crisp authority and with sureness. It was a commanding voice. It caught the attention of its hearers.

Captain Martin seemed to freeze on the ramp. Suddenly sensing what was about to happen, Craig Randall also froze. The voice came again.

"Attention, all hands! Attention, all Pluto Station men on board the *Andromeda*! A dangerous situation has been discovered in the drive room of the ship. You are hereby directed to clear the *Andromeda* instantly. A delay of a few seconds may mean the difference between life and death."

The voice gained in volume, became more commanding.

"ALL HANDS CLEAR THE SHIP INSTANTLY!"

IN THE seconds that elapsed while the voice was rolling from the ship's communication system, Craig grasped what was going to happen next, and what he was going to have to do about it.

Captain Martin spun back toward the open lock.

With all his strength, Craig slugged the captain on the side of the jaw. The blow knocked Martin sideways and down to the ramp.

But it did not knock him out. Snarling, he came to his feet. Craig he ignored, the man who had slugged him was not important to him at this moment. Cursing, he started toward the open lock. Craig tackled him around the legs. The captain fell heavily. Craig rolled with him to the edge of the ramp, forced him over it. Both fell to the hard floor of the vast hangar.

In obedience to the voice that had come over the intercom system, and which had sounded very much like the voice of Captain Martin, men were already pouring from the lock.

Beside the ramp, Craig and Captain Martin fought viciously.

In the captain's cabin, Nuoy heard the voice. He snapped open the communica-

tion line between this cabin and the control room.

"What nonsense is this?" he shouted into the mike. "There is no way a dangerous condition can develop in the drive of these ships!" He was speaking the truth. Deep-space ships, all space ships, were hazard proof so far as the drive was concerned. He expected an evasive denial.

"Of course no dangerous condition can develop," the voice from the control room answered.

"Then what do you mean by making so stupid an announcement as this? What are you trying to do, delay my departure? I'll have you stripped of your rank for this piece of nonsense!"

Wrath was in his voice. Before this wrath captains, generals, even the president of Earth Government, trembled.

The voice coming from the control room did not tremble. "Aw, go buy a muzzle for your ugly face," it said, crisply. "Who in the hell do you think you're giving orders to, Dog-face?"

Nuoy was utterly speechless. White with fury, he headed for the control room. He'd teach Captain Martin proper respect for his betters. Charging through the door of the control room, he found there a doddering old man whom he vaguely recognized as having seen around Pluto Station. The old man was sitting in the control chair, a monkey wrench in his hand.

"Who the devil was that who was just speaking to me?" Nuoy demanded.

"Why, I don't know, Mr. Nuoy. No one was speaking from here."

Nuoy glared at him. His suspicions were aroused. "I believe you are lying to me. I believe you were the one who was talking to me like that. I'll have you know—" Nuoy advanced. While he explained what he was going to do, he thrust his head down until it was within a foot of the old man's face.

Adam March slugged him with the monkey wrench. Nuoy went down without a sound. "That's why we call 'em monkey wrenches," March said, satisfaction in his voice. "They're made especially for use on monkeys like you!" Laying the wrench back on the arm of the chair, he ran his fingers over the complex system of controls in front of him.

"Clear the ship, all hands!" his voice went out over the ship. Flipping over to listening, he caught the sound of fleeing footsteps. He smiled to himself. His orders were being obeyed.

"Are all hands clear?" he shouted. "Anyone who is still in the ship, answer at once."

There was no answer. No running footsteps sounded. The ship was clear.

As if his neck had suddenly developed a will of its own, he felt it turn on his shoulders as something entered the control room.

Coming through the open door was a glowing, vibrating, angry ball of flowing crystal light.

Adam did what he had planned to do—what had to be done.

Beside the ramp, Craig knew he was losing the battle with Captain Martin. The captain was tough, hard, strong. He fought like a wild man. Using knees and elbows, he fought as if he was taking orders from someone else and his life was of no consequence.

Kicking Craig in the head, he scrambled to his feet.

The last of the crew were rushing from the ship.

"Yes, Filo," Captain Martin was screaming. "Yes, yes, I know. A horrible mistake has been made. I will correct it."

"See that you correct it immediately!" Filo's angry voice whispered in the air.

Captain Martin leaped up the runway. "Back into the ship!" he shouted at the crew. He ran up the ramp toward the open lock.

Ponderously, the lock swung shut in front of him.

He stopped, dazedly stared at it. The lock could be opened or closed from the control room. He suspected he knew what had happened.

Filo's voice raged at him. "Get into this ship instantly."

"But, I can't! Open the lock for me."

"I can't open it, you fool! Someone has jammed the controls!"

"Ah—" Captain Martin said. The single sound had all the overtones of a prayer.

Craig got to his feet, wobbled up the gangway in time to hear the last of the conversation. He caught Captain Martin's arm. "We've got to get out of the hangar," he

whispered. "If we don't—" He whispered what was going to happen next.

The captain stared at him from bewildered eyes.

A vast throb came from the ship.

"He's warming up the drive!" the captain said. "You're right. Where's the general?"

THE *Andromeda* went out of the hangar without waiting for the vast doors to be opened. There was no time to wait for that, nor would the request to open the doors have been obeyed even if it could have been transmitted. There was a tremendous, thundering screech of tortured metal as she tore the doors down. Then, with Adam March at the controls, she mounted to the sky.

The thing in the air behind him was thrown completely off-balance by the unexpected takeoff. It did not know what to do, consultation with its comrades was necessary before action could be taken. The Sorodrome spun back out of the control room.

Only minutes, perhaps less than minutes, were needed for the Sorodromes to agree on what had to be done.

Filo made the decision. "Destroy that human in the control room!"

Adam March had dreamed all of his life of being at the control of a deep-space ship. Now he had the privilege, now his dream had come true. He felt the surge of vast power at the control of his finger tips as the ship moved out of the hangar. He did not hear the crashing of the big doors. The slight bumps they made in falling was not transmitted through the ship to him. Before him were the bright clear skies of deep space. He pointed the ship upward.

In the long run, he knew what the answer would be. The Sorodromes would certainly conquer him. If they didn't do that, they would clamp down over him the same strange control they had exercised over the men of the *Andromeda*. ..

He did not anticipate that the long run would ever come into being. No! There were men on Pluto who knew what to do and who would do it.

But, even so, he could savor this moment, when a ship of deep space was under his fingers, taking him upward in a blaze of rising glory.

She was still taking him upward when the tracking Z beams struck her. She exploded in a blaze of light that was visible over most of the Solar System.

THE screens in the command center of the station revealed the flare of light that marked the passing of the *Andromeda*. The room was silent. General Stanley turned back to Craig and Mary, asking them to repeat again the story that had moved him to take this action.

Dazed, the general listened. When they had finished, he turned again to Captain Martin.

"But this immortality you talked about on Star Goal?" he questioned.

"The immortality is there all right," Captain Martin answered. "It is both real and unreal. There is no question that the Sorodromes can slow changes in body cells which produces immortality. But the process they use to do this gives them almost complete control over you. And the immortality and the control go together. Once the control is broken, the increased life span goes too. Also, if the control is broken, you begin to age very rapidly, until you come up to your actual age. Thus within the next year every man who flew with the *Andromeda* will find his body processes catching up with his chronological age."

The captain's face had become etched with lines during the past few minutes, mute evidence of the process now beginning in him. But he did not seem to mind the immortality he had lost, the price he had paid for it had been too high.

"There's one blessing anyhow," the general said. "Nuoy went with the ship." His eyes glowed at the thought of that. The Solar System would be a better place to live for many men because Nuoy was no longer in it.

"But I still don't understand about Adam March," Craig persisted. "He knew too much about the *Andromeda*."

"Not too much," Captain Martin said. "He designed and built her."

"What?" Craig gasped.

The captain nodded. "In those days he was a deep-space ship designer. His life's dream was to fly one of them, a dream he was too old to realize. But he designed and built the *Andromeda*. The next best thing to flying her, for him, was to have me fly her."

The general's face showed sudden interest.

"I see," Craig said. "If he designed the *Andromeda*, then he would know about her." His brows wrinkled as a new thought came into his mind. "But he was working here as a janitor. How—"

"Maybe several reasons," the captain answered. "His real life was the *Andromeda*. He probably came here and took any job he could get, because this would be her first landing if she ever returned to the system. If she ever came back, he wanted to be on hand to welcome her."

"Oh," Craig said. In that brief explanation, most of the puzzle of Adam March's actions became clear. "But how did he know that something was wrong on the ship?"

Captain Martin's face grew grim. "I didn't see him when I came off the ship, but I think he saw me. At the sight of me, he knew something was wrong, knew it in a way that made it impossible for him to be mistaken. He took her off alone, not only to save the station, but to save me."

"What?" Craig gasped. "He knew you, twenty years ago, before the *Andromeda* jumped into deep space?"

"Slightly," Captain Martin answered. "His name wasn't March then, it was Martin. He was my father."



*"Twas said of The Berserker  
... "when an opening  
comes he'll play for it, and  
he'll do it with a single-  
minded violence."*

# THE BERSERKER

By CHARLES V. DE VET

**A**LL of Big Jim Ostby's attention seemed on the cigar as he lit it, but it was not. He observed the faces of the men who passed him by, and the figures of those

across the street, and up and down the sidewalk. Satisfied, he moved on.

Ostby's six feet four, and two hundred thirty-five pounds, were not conspicuous on

this other-dimensional world, where his size was but little above average. And only the sharpest observer would have noted the leashed aliveness of the instrument of sinew and muscle which was his body.

Deliberately Ostby avoided the shadows. That way lay danger. Reason, abetted by an instinctive capacity for adaption, told him blending in with his background offered the best concealment.

By now the whole district would know that the police were after him. He wondered what the latest reports were. Casually he slowed his pace until two men behind him drew near enough to be overheard.

"They say the police have the Berserker cornered in our half of the Flats," one of the men said.

"If they trap 'im there's gonna be some dead police before the night's over." the second answered. "He ain't called the Berserker for nothing."

"I'd hate to be in his shoes. They've got a net around the district that a fly couldn't get through."

"I'd hate to be one of the police that corners him."

"He'll never get away this time."

"I wouldn't bet against him if I was you. The gamblers in the street are giving odds of two to one that he makes it."

"How do you figure he's got a chance?"

"I don't know. We're not cut out of the right stuff for that kind of thing. He is. When an opening comes he'll play for it, and he'll do it with a single-minded violence."

Suddenly Ostby's attention was drawn to a group of men collected at the corner ahead. Two thin lines of police were blocking the way and examining identity cards. He drew in a long, deep breath. Life for him on this world was one of a series of crises, unforeseen, but stationed along his way as regularly as mileposts.

Swiftly, but with studied unconcern, he looked about him. To turn back here would arouse attention. His cigar had gone out now, and he flicked it into the gutter.

To his right was an amusement place. He turned and entered.

The place was filled with the usual crowd of drinkers and merrymakers. Ostby found a seat at the bar and ordered a drink.

A minute later he left his stool and went to the rest room. He had to plan a way out in case of necessity. There was no back entrance to the rest room, he saw, and the only window was high above his head. Too small for a man's body to squeeze through. He'd be trapped if he let them corner him here.

Back at the bar he found his drink still waiting.

"I held your place for you," a woman's soft voice said.

OSTBY glanced into the full length mirror above the bar. The girl next to him was young and pretty. He shifted his glance to his own reflection. The mustache and the little patch of beard between his chin and lower lip had grown well. His whiskers always came in heavy and black, and they were the style now. They altered his appearance considerably.

Evidently it had not lessened his attraction for the opposite sex. That attractiveness had been with him so long that he had ceased being surprised by it. But it still puzzled him. There was strength in the features of the reflection that looked back at him, he admitted, but no beauty. Rather the outline was almost harsh, as though etched by a rough masculine hand. He wondered, without caring, why women were drawn to it.

All this retrospection occurred in the split second after he glanced into the mirror. "I am in your debt," he said, turning to his companion. His manner and expression was disinterested, even a bit disdainful. Yet his voice was gentle and courteous.

Perhaps that contrast was the thing that held women's attention. The manner seemed to imply a knowledge of their wiles, and an ability to read through their vanities. Yet his voice told them that he recognized their womanly need to be appreciated, and coddled, and that he would be invariably gentle with them.

"May I buy you a drink?" he asked.

"My glass is still full," the girl answered, and smiled at him. She did not look so young now that he saw her face to face. The features were young, but the eyes were old, and too wise for one of her chronological age. With his flameless lighter Ostby lit the white oval which the girl drew from its

package and placed between her full red lips.

All the while Ostby's eyes made their swift survey of the room and stamped its every feature in his eidetic memory. Only one exit, other than the front door, he saw. The windows were all about seven feet above the floor, and banded with burglar-bars. A man would have difficulty gaining entrance or exit.

At the opposite end of the room he observed a small dance floor and a mechanical music box. His attention was held for a moment by a party seated in a booth at the edge of the dance floor. The men and women in the booth were too well dressed, too well bred, to be down here in the Flats.

The apex of the party was a woman whose beauty attracted Ostby clear across the room.

"Who are the people in the back booth?" he asked his companion.

"The Duchess of North Hudson," the girl answered, wrinkling her nose in affected hauteur. "She's slumming. Seeing how the other half lives."

"Does she come often?"

"Only when she gets tired of being a lady. Right now she's celebrating her separation from her second husband."

Abruptly Ostby sensed something was wrong.

He glanced into the mirror. At the door stood a half dozen of the police. His gaze shifted to the rear entrance. He saw another party of police there.

"If you'll excuse me," he said to the girl, as he stepped down from his stool, "I believe I'll have a word with the Duchess."

The girl's mouth made a round O as he left her.

Ostby paused directly in front of the Duchess. Her attention swept up to him.

"My name is Captain Faas, formerly of the Emperor's private guards," he said, bowing deeply enough to show courtesy, but not so deeply as to seem subservient. "May I be so bold as to hope that the Duchess has not forgotten me?"

There was no recognition in the Duchess's look but there was interest.

"Should I remember you?" she asked.

"It was my privilege to meet her grace at the winter games a few years ago," Ostby

answered. The look he gave her was appreciative of what he saw.

The Duchess returned the look without recognition, but with amused acknowledgment of a clever approach. "Of course," she said. "How could I have forgotten? Won't you join us?"

"You are very kind," Ostby said. From the corner of his eye he saw that the soldiers were drawing nearer. They were demanding identity cards from all the men. "If I may presume on that kindness," he said to the Duchess, "would you do me the honor of dancing with me?"

The Duchess hesitated for a barely perceptible instant. "I would be happy to," she said.

THE Duchess danced well. Ostby followed the waltz piece with a fine sense of the music's rhythm that women love.

The Duchess' dress was worn off her rounded shoulders and each breath stirred the fullness of her breasts against the dress.

At the side of the dance floor he saw that a lieutenant of the police was waiting politely for them to finish their dance. The big test would come soon.

"You say we met at the winter games," the Duchess mused. She looked up at Ostby. "We danced at the ball after the games, did we not?"

"That's right," Ostby answered, while one part of his mind considered the problem of the lieutenant waiting for them. "That is why I asked you to dance. I'd hoped it would recall our acquaintance."

"Acquaintance is such a formal word," the Duchess said teasingly, and Ostby knew, without pride, that she was reacting to that intangible something about him that pleased women. He looked down into her eyes and noted just a suggestion of permanent crinkles at the corners. He judged her age as about thirty-three, seven years older than himself.

"I assure you that I feel anything but formal when I hold you in my arms," he answered, following her lead. He made her feel desirable by the things he expressed in his glance.

In the meantime the other portion of Ostby's mind had made its decision concerning the lieutenant.



"I see the police are making another of their nuisance spot-checks," he said. "I'm afraid I'm due to go through a bit of red tape. I've misplaced my identity card."

"I hear they're tracking down some notorious criminal," the Duchess answered. Abruptly her glance, full of sudden speculation, swept up and studied his face. After a short pause she said something that at first thought sounded irrelevant. "I've never danced at the winter games," she said.

Ostby drew in a quick breath. She knew!

The lieutenant was beside them now.

"You won't need to see his identity card, officer. He's with me," Ostby heard the Duchess say, and he let his breath out in a long silent sigh.

The lieutenant was not satisfied, but he was clearly afraid to press matters. He bowed to the Duchess as they walked past him.

Ostby lay on his back, with his knees drawn up and his hands beneath his head. His eyes shifted idly about the room, taking in its every feature automatically. It was this automatic attention to details that had always helped him land on his feet in the past whenever he had been in trouble. And he might be in trouble now. Too much of his trust rested with the Duchess—Rinda, she had asked him to call her. His entire safety rested in her fair hands—and he did not like it. He liked to trust no one except himself.

Ostby had accepted the invitation to visit her because he needed a place to hide; and because she knew too much for him to do anything except agree. But he would have chosen otherwise had he had a choice.

However, his reason told him that she had not taken him from the grip of the police to turn him in now.

And so he lay quietly, with the relaxed alertness of a resting cat. His thoughts were back on Earth.

When he had taken this assignment to come through the "door" between the worlds, he had known that there would be hardships, and that his life would be continually in danger, but it was moments like these that he hated the most—moments when he was not able to dictate the next step.

Approximately twenty years earlier—in

1950—the aliens had somehow made their "door" between the worlds; that "door" which never appeared twice in the same spot. At first they had been content to come in, circle their noiseless vessels through the air as they observed the Earth, then return through their shifting "door." They had refused all contact. Then gradually evidence began to come in that they were raiding undefended areas, abducting men and stealing property. Their depredations increased through the years until eventually they constituted a major menace.

There was no effective defense against them. Now and then one of their air ships was shot down but invariably it exploded before crashing. At last, in desperation, the United Governments had attempted to get operatives through with the captured persons. Ostby was one of the few instances of success.

For six months now, by dint of adroit maneuvering and luck, he had managed to stay alive, but he was no nearer to closing the "door."

Impatiently Ostby climbed to his feet and began pacing the room. He had never been able to get used to these rooms, with no corners, and all their furniture in the center. But they made for convenient pacing.

Had he been wrong in his estimate of the Duchess, he wondered. She had appeared too much woman to let matters of the state come ahead of her private affairs. Suddenly he stopped in mid-stride as there came a gentle tapping on his door. He had not been wrong!

## II

THE Duchess had been a woman of her word, Ostby reflected, as he leaned against the counter sipping his drink. Knowing full well who he was, she had allowed him to leave, making no demands of him, and inviting him back whenever he cared to come. She was quite a woman. Some day, if and when he was able to clear up this business, he would return.

Now the time had come for him to change tactics. He had been able to accomplish nothing by playing a lone hand. He needed help. When you opposed the police the best place to seek help—he had decided

—was among others who broke the law. Thus he returned to the Flats, hangout of the underworld.

To make his contact with the underworld the first step should be some spectacular move that would focus their attention on him. "Fill it up," he said, sliding his glass along the bar. From his pocket he drew a thick roll of bills, a thickness caused by paper padding.

He paid for his drink and laid the roll carelessly at his elbow.

A minute went by and he felt someone slide in beside him. From the corner of his eye Ostby observed his companion. When he saw a hand close over the bills, he reached swiftly over and gripped the wrist of the hand that held the money. "Drop it," he said.

The thief's lips parted over stained teeth, but he said nothing. For a moment he stared back, viciously, then he shifted his body slightly and Ostby felt a knife point pierce the flesh of his right side and come to rest against his ribs. "Let go, bud." The thief spoke low without moving his lips.

Ostby hunched his shoulders and twisted his body around in a half circle. As the thug went off balance Ostby pulled forward, still gripping the wrist, and threw him over his shoulder. The thug struck the floor on the flat of his back, and the wind left his lungs. He lay for a moment, his body doubled up, and one leg kicking spasmodically, as he fought for breath. Ostby bent over, picked up his money, and leaned backward, with his elbows resting against the bar, and watched the struggling man.

All the fight had left the thief by the time he regained his breath. He cast one venomous look at Ostby as he climbed to his feet, and left the drinking place.

The preliminaries were over. Now to await the main action. It was not long in coming.

"That was pretty rough treatment," a coarse voice near Ostby said. He turned his head. The man had a day's growth of whiskers, and a long scar stretched his mouth into a permanent grin. Ostby shrugged non-committally and turned back to his drink.

"You a stranger in town?" the man persisted.

Ostby nodded, as he frowned and brought

his attention back to the harsh-voiced man.

"I'm not being nosey," the man said, "but you handle yourself like a lad who's been around. And you must be afraid of the law or you wouldn't be hanging out down here. Right?"

Ostby turned and faced the stranger squarely. "Is it any of your business?" he asked belligerently.

The man held up his hand. "Take it easy," he said. "I'm looking for a fellow like you. Do you have the guts to kill a man?"

Ostby found a cellar window unlocked. He crawled through and let his legs hang down. When they touched a floor he pulled himself completely in. He paused and let his eyes become adjusted to the semi-dark.

At the end of the cellar he could make out a short flight of stairs.

Ostby climbed the stairs and softly opened the door. Directly in front of him, but half way across the room, a fat man sat in an over-stuffed armchair. He sat so quietly that at first Ostby thought that he was dead.

Only when he reached the fat man's side did he see that the slate gray eyes of the man had been watching him since he entered.

"If you were able to get this far," the fat man said, still not moving a muscle, "my guards have been bought off."

"You're Siggen?" Ostby asked.

"Who else?" Siggen twisted his lips into an ironic smile and bowed his head. "I'm Siggen, head of the thieves of Yarr. And you're here to kill me, May I ask who sent you?"

"Can't you guess?"

"Many men would like to see me dead. Most of them are afraid to try it themselves. Just as the one who sent you is afraid. But don't bother telling me who did it. Roka has coveted my place for a long time."

Ostby said nothing.

"I trusted too much in my guards," Siggen said, more to himself than to Ostby. "My reputation must have sunk low if they allowed themselves to be bought." He sighed. "Perhaps it's no use trying to save this old hulk, but hope dies hard." For a moment his tired face showed stark and

very naked in the light of the lamp. And somehow Ostby felt a bond of sympathy with the old man. "How much will you take to spare my life?"

"What will you pay?" Ostby asked.

"Roka probably paid you a thousand heds," Siggen answered. "I'll pay you ten thousand."

"A fair enough exchange," Ostby said.

"Except that I don't want money."

"Then what do you want?"

"I want help—to enter the Stalls. And to get out again with my life."

"A simple order, for Siggen." The fat man had his vanity. "Give me a day to plan it. You have my word."

"Can I depend on it?"

"Men have said many things about Siggen, but never that his word was not good."

"Then it's settled," Ostby said. "I'll be back tomorrow."

"Just a minute before you go." The old man unclasped his puffy hands. "You are an unusual man and you intrigue me. Would you mind telling me your name?"

"Not at all. It's James Ostby."

"Ostby . . . Ostby . . ." the fat man pondered slowly. Then his head came up. "The Berserker!" he said. He whistled low, under his breath. "Tell me," he said, "why have we never met before. Or, if not, why are we meeting now?"

Ostby shrugged. "Perhaps because I have little confidence in others."

"You do have the reputation of being a lone wolf." Siggen remarked slowly. "After this business is over I'd be glad to consider consolidating our, ah, talents. We could go far together."

"You offer me this when you know me so little?"

"The best test of good relations between men is an instinctive liking," Siggen said. "I feel we have this, plus a common purpose."

"I'll think it over," Ostby replied. "In the meantime I'll expect results tomorrow."

Ostby lay flat on his stomach with his head facing the window in front of him. The window was set flush with the floor and he had a good view of the Stalls across the street.

The Stalls was a squat, three-story building, with a basement and a sub-basement.

The upper three stories were occupied by government offices. The basement housed the heating equipment and was used as a storage space. But it was the sub-basement that gave the place its name. Here the slaves were kept until sold.

THE deserted office room in which Ostby lay had been closed for many months, and it was hot inside, and close. The sun shining through the windows added to the heat, and the film of moisture that bathed his body had long since developed small rivulets that collected in sodden patches of his clothing.

"How much longer will it be, Groves?" Ostby asked.

"There's no way of knowing." The young man who sat with his back resting against the wall had wilted under the heat and crawled over out of the sunlight. "As soon as it's safe," he said. "Let me know if you see anyone coming out."

"I thought Siggen had fixed it so we could get in without any trouble?"

"He bribed the guards," Groves replied. "But you saw those two men go in. I recognized one of them as Boorrls of the secret police. They're liable to turn up any place, any time. We'd be sticking our necks out to go in while they're there."

For another ten minutes neither man said a word. A big drop of moisture collected on the cleft in the middle of Ostby's chin. He wished he were certain that he could trust Groves. Groves was an open-faced young man with candor in his blue eyes, and a ready smile that asked for confidence, but somewhere in the man's makeup was a black streak, Ostby reckoned.

All morning Ostby's infallible intuition had throbbled a slow pulse of warning. He knew better than to disregard that warning but when he turned to thieves for help he had no right to expect sterling characters for companions.

Siggen should have enough control over his men to make Groves afraid to double-cross him. And, strangely enough, Ostby trusted Siggen. His intuition told him that Siggen was a man true to his own principles, distorted though they might be.

Ostby had seen another facet of Siggen's character that morning. When he had re-

turned to the house Siggen had introduced him to Groves, and the three of them had gone down into the fat man's basement.

"I want to show you a pretty sight," Siggen said.

Lying on the basement floor was the body of a man. A knife was buried in his throat. The dead mouth that smiled up at Ostby was widened by a long scar.

"What will we do when we get in the Stalls?" Groves interrupted Ostby's reflections.

Ostby did not answer, but turned his head to look at the young man, long and levelly.

"It's none of my business, of course," Groves added hurriedly, "but I won't be much help in case of trouble if I don't even know what you're trying to do."

"If trouble comes we just get out as fast as we can."

"You aren't going to try to get one of the slaves out, are you? You told Siggen that you only wanted to get in, and get out again."

"That's all I want."

"If you're trying to close the 'door,' what would you want in. . ." Abruptly Groves stopped talking. Ostby read the dismay in his voice as he realized that he had said too much.

Ostby rolled over on his side, bringing his gun up and firing in the same motion. Groves had his own gun drawn when the slug caught him in the forehead and slapped his head back as though riding the blow of a fist. Slowly he fell sideways along the wall.

Ostby was on his feet immediately. He'd have to move fast now, he knew. No one but the police, or someone high in the Emperor's confidence, would know that he was here to close the "door" between the worlds. Groves had made a bad slip.

In Groves' right rear pocket Ostby found a black billfold. Inside was a white card with the word, *Confidential*, written on it. He found nothing else of interest. But that was enough to wipe away Ostby's last doubt. Sweat broke out anew on his forehead as he realized how close the trap had come to closing around him. He might be too late already.

On the other hand, he reflected, perhaps this would be the moment when boldness

would accomplish more than it ever could have in the past. He had been able to get nowhere in the past months with caution, and this time, being so close, he would not turn back.

## II.

OSTBY entered the Stalls through a back door. The building was built on a hill. At the front, the first floor was on the ground level. But the door Ostby entered opened into the sub-basement.

The card he had taken from Groves gained him ready admittance. He flashed it once again to the clerk seated at a desk in the inner office. The clerk nodded respectfully and Ostby went through into the main section of the sub-basement; the section housing the slaves.

The stench that struck his nostrils was nauseating. It stank of men too closely crowded, of unwashed bodies, and of inadequate sanitation.

The place was dimly lit.

Ostby waved back the "trusty" who came forward to meet him, and went alone along the stalls. At each gate he paused to look through the thick mesh wire at the hope-deadened specimens who lay apathetically on the uncleaned floor. Some of the prisoners were criminals of the state, but most of them were captive Earth people.

Ostby did not pause long at any compartment until he reached one in the corner of the huge room. He studied the creature seated in a wall-crook staring back at him. The slave's beard was an inch long and his features were hardly recognizable, yet something about him held Ostby's attention.

After a short minute Ostby said, "Detroit," in a low tone.

The prisoner did not move but his eyes glinted in the dim light as he opened them wider. His lips formed the sound, "Tigers," as he answered the code word.

"What have they done with Rohr?" Ostby asked.

"I'm afraid you're too late," the slave answered. "The guard took him away yesterday—through that door, over on the far side. If he's still alive, they're probably torturing him right now."

"I'll be back," Ostby said, and he walked

rapidly toward the door the prisoner had indicated.

Once inside Ostby flashed his card at the guard sitting on a desk, paring his fingernails. "Where's the spy?" he asked briskly.

"Straight through," the guard answered. "Inspector Boorrls is working on him now."

In the back room Ostby closed the door behind him and stood with his back against it. The two men standing in the center of the room turned to look at him. He let the silence grow thin without speaking. It was with an effort that he kept his eyes from the figure that hung by its wrist tendons, on steel hooks suspended from the ceiling.

The taller of the two men shifted his feet uncomfortably, and wiped his right palm along the leg of his trousers. "What do you want?" he asked irritably.

Ostby drew his card from his pocket and showed it to them. "I'm direct from the Emperor," he said. "Which one of you is Boorrls?"

"I am," the tall man answered.

"Have you made him talk yet?"

"No. He's stubborn as all hell. But he'll talk soon or I'll kill him."

"That's what the Emperor was afraid of," Ostby said bleakly. "And that's why he sent me. Now get out while I try to save what you may have lost already with your stupidity."

For a moment the inspector seemed determined to bluff it out. "What did you say?" he asked pugnaciously.

"I said get out!" Ostby's voice did not rise, but there was no mistaking the threat behind it.

Boorrls broke easily. He was a bully. "C'mon, Jorg," he mumbled and the two men left the room.

THE figure suspended on the hooks could not see Ostby. Where his eyes had been were now only bloody orifices. His stomach was cut to ribbons and the inside organs showed through. He was beyond the help of any doctor.

He seemed to have recognized Ostby's voice. His lips and tongue moved agonizingly as he strove to speak. When he finally succeeded his voice came from far back in his throat—hardly more than a whisper. "For God's sake," the voice croaked, "kill

me! Please!"

Ostby repressed a shudder as he gently touched the tortured man's leg.

They had picked him, back on Earth, for this job because his was a sensitive organism, keyed with "high survival characteristics."

His nervous system was geared exceptionally high, and its acute reflexes with their delicate balance of intricate excitations made his response to stimuli proportionately more rapid than that of other men.

Yet this very sensitiveness of brain and nerve fiber made the brutal circumstances with which he was forced to cope all the more difficult to endure. It was ironical that the very qualities that made him the most fit for this dangerous kind of work, made him suffer the greatest under its harshness.

Ostby could remember how, even as a child, he had suffered through this keenness of emotional reaction. His empathy with any person or animal in distress always caused him pain nearly as great as that of the sufferer.

In later years he had developed a philosophy that helped carry him through most of those trying times. He had never exactly defined that philosophy but it encompassed the ability to recognize "the little things as little, and the big things as big; and to laugh in the face of the inevitable, to smile even at the looming death."

This philosophy was never able to give him the shell of hardness which would have shielded him from most of the meanness of the world, but it had given him the strength to bear it.

Now the suffering of the wretched creature before him played along Ostby's nerves like a live flame.

"Everything will be over in a minute," he said softly. He opened his shirt front and exposed a mesh-weave vest fitted close against his skin. In the innumerable pockets of the vest he carried everything he owned on this world.

From one of the pockets he drew a hypodermic syringe with a plastic vial filled with light green liquid. He pushed the needle into the flesh of the hanging man's leg, and pressed the plunger home.

A moment later the suspended figure sighed once, long and gratefully, and was

still. They would never be able to torture him again.

Ostby studied the mechanism that held the hooks, but could find no way to lower the body. Impatiently he pulled a chair over and stood on it. He probed the body's thin left forearm with his thumbs until he found the spot he sought.

Drawing a sharp scalpel from his vest he cut a thin slit through the flesh. When he felt the blade touch something solid he probed deeply into the cut and brought out a small, innocuous appearing capsule. The cut did not bleed and Ostby pressed its sides together. It appeared no different than any of the other cuts on the emaciated body.

He hesitated no longer than it took to pick the exact spot he wanted on his own forearm. If they had been unable to find the hiding place on Rohr, it should serve as well for him.

With almost surgical skill he cut a small slit in the flesh of his forearm. Probing with the scalpel until he had opened a small pocket, he placed the capsule in the opening and forced it down. From the vest he removed a flat carton and sprinkled sulphur powder into the cut. In a few days time it would heal and there would be no mark left of the hiding place. If he could only buy that few days' time!

Ostby stepped through into the outer office. Boorls and his aide were nowhere about. That could be dangerous. His time was undoubtedly running short.

Ostby walked back to the stall of the prisoner he had conferred with earlier, at the same time motioning the trusty over to him. "Open this stall and let me in," he commanded.

"Lock it again and leave us alone," he said to the trusty as he entered. The trusty obeyed and left.

Ostby turned immediately to the prisoner. "This is it," he said. "We'll have to move fast." He took a flat tube from one of his vest pockets and tossed it over. "First, get rid of that beard. But be sure to leave a mustache and a chin beard like mine."

The slave applied the depilatory to his beard. "What about Rohr?" he asked.

"Dead," Ostby answered laconically as he removed his clothes.

Neither said anything more as the slave

washed his face and wet his hair from a trough of dirty water. In the meantime Ostby dirtied his own face and hands. The slave stripped and they exchanged clothes.

"Rattle on the gate," Ostby said after they finished. "It's not very bright in here, and with that mustache and beard you should pass for me without any trouble. But don't give them more chance than necessary to spot the deception by wasting any time."

Five minutes later Ostby was alone—just another grimy slave curled up in his filthy sty. A perfect hideout. The last place they would look for him.

SOMETIME during the morning of the third day Ostby was awakened by the rattling of the wire gate of his stall. He rolled over on his side and looked out. The trusty who brought him his food twice a day was shaking the gate.

"On your feet," he said, "and make it snappy."

Ostby climbed erect without argument. He had no intention of directing attention to himself by making trouble. By now his black hair and beard were matted with dirt, his skin was soiled with many thicknesses of grime, and he stunk with the stench of the prison blocks.

A few minutes later a short man—approximately six feet tall, but short for these people—bustled importantly forward. He was dressed in lace-adorned dress which proclaimed him one of this world's aristocracy. The newcomer eyed Ostby disdainfully for a moment and then passed on without a word.

Later the self-important dandy returned with the trusty in tow. He stopped in front of Ostby's cage. "Bring him out here where I can get a better look at him," he ordered.

The trusty unlocked the gate and Ostby shuffled out.

"He's a filthy looking beast," the nobleman remarked, as he slowly circled Ostby. He evidenced only the interest of a man appraising an animal. "However, he seems to have a splendid body beneath those layers of dirt. I'll take him, but I suppose I'll find him rotten with disease when I have him cleaned up."

The trusty and one of the guards snapped a leg-iron around Ostby's left ankle while the nobleman went into the office to pay for

his purchase. They led Ostby out to a waiting carriage and secured the other end of his leg-iron to a bolt set in the floor of the carriage. Two of the nobleman's liveried servants seated themselves on either side of Ostby. The nobleman sat across from them.

They drove for almost a half-hour before the carriage stopped in front of a low, one-story stone building. No one spoke. The servants alighted, and one of them unlocked Ostby's leg-iron from its bolt in the floor.

"Step down," the nearest servant said.

Ostby obeyed and they walked, with Ostby again between them, toward the stone house. The nobleman remained in the carriage.

One of the servants opened the unlocked door of the stone house and the other shoved Ostby through the doorway. They closed the door behind him, and he stood in a dark room, blinded by the sudden change from bright sunlight. The first sight that met his eyes, as they adjusted to the dim light lurking under the drawn shades, was the familiar one of a fat man slumped in an easy chair!

"Welcome to my new abode," Siggen said.

The events of the past hour snapped into place in Ostby's mind in an instant and he evidenced no surprise as he smiled back at Siggen. He even debated with himself whether or not Siggen had done him a service by taking him from his foolproof hiding place so soon. But then he had another in mind that should serve as well if he had not underestimated his influence with the Duchess, Rinda.

"You pay your debts, I see," he said.

"Siggen's word is his bond," the fat man said. "I told you I would get you in and get you out. Our bargain is now complete."

"Your man put on a good act as a nobleman," Ostby said. "He fooled me as completely as he did the guards."

"It was no act," Siggen replied. "He is a nobleman. But he owed Siggen a favor."

"Good work," Ostby said. "Accept my thanks. Incidentally, I suppose you know by now that your man, Groves, was a secret agent?"

"No, I did not," Siggen answered. "I wondered why he never returned. I presume you took care of him?"

"Yes," Ostby replied.

"Good," Siggen said. "I almost missed knowing they had you. The reports were that the Berserker had been shot leaving the Stalls. But I sent a man to check on it and he reported that the man shot by the police was not you."

So poor Barbasiewicz had not gotten away, Ostby reflected sadly. And Rohr, too, was dead. That left him completely alone. But he had made some progress. He had the capsule. If the Duchess would hide him until he was ready for his next action he might still be able to close the "door." "Can you get me a carriage?" he asked Siggen.

"I THINK you'd be taking too big a chance if you went to the palace, even with the crowd there for the ball," the Duchess said.

Her anxiety made Ostby a bit uncomfortable. Their flirtation was no longer a game with her. He felt a bit guilty whenever he observed, by the thousand little signs she gave, that she was in love with him.

In ordinary times he might have loved her, also; but he was a man who never did things by halves. He had come to this world for one purpose, and he would not allow himself to be diverted from it—not even by a woman so fascinating as Rinda!

He looked at her now, beside him, with her rich brown hair done up in a pug on the back of her neck, and intertwined with a string of matched pearls; her soft skin, which the sun had turned to the shade of golden honey; and her red lips.

She returned the look, her blue eyes warm with love. She was a tall woman, well-formed, and she rested languidly against her cushions, but deep within Ostby could read the quiescent female vitality that rode her always.

"I'm afraid that I have no choice," he said gently. "It's something that I must do."

He was glad that she had never questioned him in the week he had been with her, since his escape from the Stalls. She knew only that he was doing something unlawful, and that the police wanted him badly.

But she was a temperamental woman, Ostby knew, and her moods were as sudden and mercurial as a tropic storm. Now he



observed one of those sudden changes building up within her.

"I've decided not to let you go," she said. "It's too dangerous."

Ostby had had enough experience with her to know that temporizing was useless. It hurt him to be brutal, especially when he realized that her stubbornness was prompted by concern for him, but he could not let himself be detained now. "I must," he said, "and there's no use our arguing about it."

"I said you're not going," she repeated.

"If you wish, I'll return when I'm able," Ostby said, rising.

She, too, recognized the inflexible spirit in him, and passion flared up suddenly in her face, A flush of blood darkened the olive of her skin. She twisted in sudden fury and buried her teeth in the flesh of his wrist.

Ostby reached over with his free hand and dug his fingers deeply into the ridge of her jawbone.

"I'll kill you for that!" she gritted, releasing her grip.

Ostby knew they had gone too far now for any hope of reconciliation. He bent her arms behind her back and bound them tightly with the long sleeves of her gown.

The Duchess was relaxed now, making no attempt to resist him. Her face had gone hard and the skin was stretched tightly across her cheekbones.

She said nothing as he bound her feet and gagged her. But the venom in her eyes made him pause. This woman was not soft, he saw, and he knew he had made an enemy who would be ruthless. He did not look back as he left the room but he could feel her gaze following him—hating him, as only a frustrated woman can hate!

#### IV

HE GLANCED up at the huge square frame of the palace, crouched like a great machine waiting to devour him. There was something about the building that was subtle, mysterious, luring. Engraved in deep convex letters above the door was the motto of the Emperor: THE WORLD BELONGS TO THE STRONG. Now for the 7—PLANET—March

first time, Ostby thought, he was to meet that controversial figure face to face.

There was no formal greeting of the entering guests. Two liveried servants stood at either side of the entrance, eyeing, politely but carefully, each entrant. They did not stop Ostby and he passed through the doorway. He deposited his outer wrap with still other servants inside, and mingled unobtrusively with the guests in the wide entrance hall.

For a half hour Ostby loitered about the edge of the thickening crowd, wearing an expression of abstract concentration that discouraged conversation. At the end of that time the Emperor had not appeared. Ostby decided to wait no longer.

Walking casually down a long corridor that led into the palace he began his search for the man he wanted. The occasional servants he met asked no questions. They merely nodded politely and went about their duties.

When he came to a long circular stairway he walked quickly up. He knew that the closer he came to his goal the greater would be the risk. But this was not the time for surreptitious conniving. Only action would produce results now.

A door opened suddenly behind him and a voice said, "Keep walking."

Strangely Ostby was glad to hear the voice.

"I'm not moving," he said.

A gun pressed against his back and he knew the time had come to act. Pivoting on the balls of his feet he knocked aside the hand that held the gun with his left arm. As he completed the pivot he aimed his right fist at the stranger's face.

His assailant rolled with the blow and it caught him with glancing force on the chin. But it was hard enough to drive him off his feet.

Ostby followed swiftly, but his opponent turned like a cat and kicked both feet into his stomach. The kick knocked the breath from Ostby's lungs. Black circles ringed his vision and the only thing that worked then was instinct. He grabbed at the ankles as the man's feet came up again. Letting the momentum of the kick furnish most of the power, he pulled on the ankles in a circular jerk that lifted the man clear of the floor.

Ostby swung him around in a wide circle,

scraping his head and shoulders on the wall of the hallway, before releasing his grip. The gunman crashed unconscious against the far wall.

Ostby took two steps forward, and a blinding light bathed his body! He turned, raising one leg to retreat, and found himself fighting with an awful exertion to set it down again!

The air had become viscous, and he took one step that felt as though he were walking in freshly mixed cement. The cement hardened rapidly and held him rigid. Next his vision blurred, and he stood with all power of motion gone. His respiratory function was his only movement.

HE WAS no longer rational enough to judge when the agony in his muscles changed their tenor to the sensation of a thousand needles being stabbed into his flesh. Somehow he knew that this meant the paralysis was leaving.

The first muscles to free themselves were those in the lids of his eyes. He opened them and found himself staring into the iciest, most emotionless eyes he had ever seen. Strangely enough they were brown eyes yet they gave the definite impression of being colorless.

The eyes were in a face carved with lines of craglike pride. Strength and ruthlessness breathed in every feature. Ostby needed no introduction to know that the face belonged to the Emperor!

A voice said, "He can see and hear now. But his power of speech and movement won't return for a few minutes." The voice came from Ostby's right. He was unable to turn to see who spoke.

The Emperor smiled. "My Name is Magogar," he said to Ostby in a voice an octave lower than normal. "I've been waiting a long time to meet you."

Ostby returned the look, wordlessly—all he was capable of doing.

"We'll begin our discussion," Magogar said, "with my telling you that I know you are the one they call the Berserker, what your mission is, and much else about you that you may not suspect. On the other hand, there are many things you do not know about me, and, strange as it may seem, there are some things concerning yourself that you

do not know.

"When you were first brought into our world," Magogar continued, "you made the mistake of confiding in several of your fellow captives, thinking that they would aid you. Needless to say, one of them talked. That last I probably don't have to tell you; you must have guessed, because you made your escape soon after. You didn't even try your preconcocted story."

"You knew about that too?" Ostby asked, and was surprised that he was able to speak again.

"Yes. You were right in believing that your confidants would be sympathetic to your schemes, but you forgot one thing. Men can be made to talk."

Ostby had recovered some of his self-possession by this time. "If you know, tell me what that plan was," he said.

"Certainly," Magogar replied. He rose to his feet and walked with long strides about the room. Ostby was surprised at the breath and girth of the man. At first glance he appeared squat. But that appearance was a deception caused by his great bulk. He was as tall as Ostby, but heavier of bone, and must have weighed a hundred pounds more. He walked heavily, each step landing forcefully on the heel of the foot.

"One of our ships," the Emperor said, "read your distress signal of colored rocks and picked you up. Your story was to be that you were a survivor of a ship of ours which crashed twenty years earlier. I believe you had established quite an authentic story. Your mother and father had been hurt, and died several years after the crash, you said. But not before they had taught you, their six-year-old son, to care for himself, to pass as one of the people of the world in which you found yourself, and last, how to establish contact with us. It was a good story, and its background was authentic. Tell me, why did you decide not to use it?"

Ostby shrugged. "Mainly because I made the mistake of confiding my plans to several of your prisoners. And you forced one of them to talk."

Unexpectedly Magogar no longer seemed to be paying attention to Ostby. He had turned his head and was looking to his left. It was then Ostby remembered that he had made no effort to discover to whom the

other voice he had heard belonged. The thought of it now made him realize how much his faculties had been dulled by their session under the paralysis. Ordinarily, by this time he would have had every detail of the room catalogued in his mind. He hastened now to correct the omission.

The sight that met his eyes as he turned his head was one that would stay with him for all the years of his life!

A square, paneled box, supported by four sturdy legs, rested against the wall, across the room from them. In the center of the box was a large eye!

The eye had no pupil; its entire surface was one of mottled streaks of gray, pink, and black. The colors slowly flowed and changed, following a seemingly erratic pattern. It was the weirdest sight Ostby ever expected to see. And behind and through it all glowed intelligence—human, reasoning intelligence!

Vaguely, through his momentary funk, Ostby heard the Emperor's voice, "Allow me to introduce you to the Brain."

Then those vague rumors he had heard had been true, Ostby reflected, or at least some facets of them. He had heard talk—which he had regarded as superstitions—that the Emperor possessed the living brain of a man long dead, a brain of infinite wisdom, and possessing all the knowledge there was to be had. Ostby was forced to believe in its existence now, for here he was faced with the living proof.

Once again Magogar's words interrupted his reverie. But the words were not directed at him. "He's here now. What did you want to ask before I have him killed?"

"You may change your mind about that after you hear what I have to say," a voice from the box answered. "You call yourself Ostby," it said. "Do you remember your father or your mother?"

Ostby stared at the apparition, not answering. The reality of the present situation, and yet its impossibility, was overwhelming.

The voice in the box continued. "I believe that I am safe in assuming that you do not remember them. I would like now to give you a hypothetical problem. If we were to assume that everything upon which you built your life were false: that the men you trusted lied to you: that you are not even

who and what you believe you are . . . what would you do?"

The voice paused, but Ostby remained silent and it went on, "The records of the people of our world, who crashed in yours, I assume you studied very carefully. That would be necessary to make your planned deception more effective. Their names were Shemolang and Roelang. Am I correct?"

Ostby nodded. The Brain went on. "Shemolang was no ordinary man. He was first in line for the Emperor office, after Magogar."

The voice shifted its focus by some subtle change of the vision in the eye, and Ostby knew that it no longer addressed him. "Will you look in the files and find a picture there of Shemolang, Magogar?"

The Emperor brought his attention to alertness with an obvious effort of will. He had been listening as intently as Ostby. Now he rose and walked to the indicated files.

After a minute he drew a picture from one of the files and studied it. The Emperor gasped and murmured, "I had almost forgotten how he looked."

"Show the picture to Mr. Ostby, will you please?" the Brain said.

Ostby took the picture and the first glance sent a shock through his system that started as a weight in the pit of his stomach and flooded his body like fever. The picture that looked back at him was very nearly a replica of himself!

"Your father," the Brain interrupted his thoughts. "You not only have had a vast deception practiced upon you, but you have been fighting your own people!"

V

THAT night Ostby slept very little. In his thoughts two emotions fought for dominance. On the one side were the people of Earth—he still thought of it as his Earth. He had lived with them; they were his friends; their problems and joys had always been his—until now. The menace to them had been his to share, and to help eliminate. He had accepted this assignment knowing that, at best, he would never be able to return; at worst, that he would be killed. And he had taken it willingly.

Now he knew that he had been duped.

He had been an alien among the people he loved. And they had sent him to fight his own kind!

His final decision came hard, but by morning he had made his choice.

He rose early but had to wait until well into the afternoon before the Emperor put in an appearance.

Magogar greeted Ostby with a smile, but there was no friendliness in it. He was a man who made no friends. The people about him were divided into two classes: those who served or obeyed him, and those who opposed him. The latter did not survive long.

"Step out onto the sun balcony with me," the Emperor said, with the easy assurance of a man accustomed to obedience. He strolled to the railing of the balcony and leaned against it, looking out over the water of the city's harbor. The balcony extended out over the water, which came directly up to a small walk bordering the palace.

"I have given your case very deep thought," the Emperor said, "and I will be perfectly frank with you. Whether I accept you or dispose of you will be directly determined by what I decide within the immediate future. There is no point in my asking your views because your range of choices is very small, and entirely incidental to my decision. You can willingly accept whatever I decide for you—if I let you live—or you can oppose me. The latter, of course, would be tantamount to asking for death. Do you have anything to say before we continue?"

"Not knowing what you have to offer leaves me with no possibility of making a choice," Ostby said carefully.

It was immediately evident, however, that he had made a wrong choice of words. The Emperor's arrogant brows rose and he frowned. "I never *offer* anything," he said, spacing each word with a hard emphasis, "except the choice of accepting my decisions."

When Ostby made no reply, Magogar seated himself and remained in deep introspection.

"Let me tell you a story," he said finally. "At first it may sound like idle boasting, but I can readily demonstrate to you that I am the living proof of its authenticity."

The Emperor paused while he tilted back his chair and stared at the ceiling. "In the early years of man's existence," he said, "he possessed two physical survival characteristics. First, he could run. As he was one of the weakest of the animals he found that most expeditious. And because the instinct to run grew to occupy a prominent place in his emotional makeup, it enabled him to survive.

"The other survival factor was to fight. The fighters died an earlier death than did those that ran, and they had fewer progeny. But those fighters that lived ruled the tribes.

"During each generation these separate instincts developed and became more virile. The numbers of the fliers propagated and soon the mass of the human race consisted of their descendants. The fighters, however, ruled the tribes, as was logical. They were the doers, and became the leaders.

"I, Mr. Ostby, am a direct descendant of this long line of fighters—perhaps its culmination. I have never known fear, and I never flee! I have inherited the strength of those ancestors, and I rule now because I am the strongest man in the world, both mentally and physically. The world belongs to the strong, and I am the strongest. Let that weigh heavily in every thought you have concerning me."

Ostby found himself wondering in amazement at the colossal pride that could give birth to such thought processes.

"Now," the Emperor went on, "let me give you one last warning before you leave. You may be in line for my position, and you must prove to me that you are strong enough to take my place, if that ever becomes necessary. On the other hand if your strength evidences itself by the slightest opposition to me, I will kill you. Thus you have a fine line to walk, with your life hanging in the balance.

"This concludes our interview until later this afternoon," the Emperor said. "I would suggest, in the meantime, that you consult the Brain. He can supply you with an understanding of our background which you may find useful."

OSTBY was glad the Emperor had suggested his speaking with the Brain. He had made his decision now, but there was

much the Brain could tell him that he needed to know.

He walked down one flight and into the room housing the Brain. When he arrived he found it awake and obviously watching him. Once again he experienced a vast discomfort in meeting that giant eye, with its mottled apperception. He wondered uneasily if it had the power to read his mind.

Ostby's unease was not lessened by the Brain's first words. "You have finished your interview with the Emperor," it said. "Evidently you were wise enough not to antagonize him or you would not be here now. Is there anything special you would like to ask me?"

There was much he wanted to learn from the Brain and Ostby had no hesitation in replying.

"What are you?" he asked without preliminaries. "How old are you, and just what is the extent of your powers?"

For a moment Ostby was afraid that he had, in some way, made a wrong approach, and that the Brain would refuse to answer him, for it was silent. But finally it said, quietly, "Perhaps one question at a time would be better for both of us. I can answer directly then, and you will be able to assimilate the answers more easily. Some of them will have many ramifications and require supplementary explanations.

"I am over five hundred years old. I was originally a man, the same as yourself, and one of the few real scientists our race has produced. I limited my activity to no one field, but delved into anything that interested me. One of my interests was longevity. When I decided that immortality was limited by the weaknesses of the bodily vehicle to which I was tied, I designed this instrument in which my brain resides, and trained others to make the essential transfer. Does that answer your questions?"

"All except the extent of your intellectual ability. The rumor is that you know everything."

"That, of course, is ridiculous. Knowledge is like a fan-shaped wave; beginning with the first fact learned, and spreading wider and wider the more one learns. I started with an exceptional intellect, and for five hundred years have acquired as much knowledge as that intellect, and a vast

curiosity, could give me."

"I see," Ostby said as he framed the next question in his mind. "What is your relationship with the Emperor?" he asked. "Are you an ally or a servant?"

"That is a bit difficult to answer," the Brain said, "because it depends on the viewpoint of the observer. As far as Magogar is concerned, I suppose I am both, though surely more of a servant than an equal. As I regard it, he is merely another man, though one who supplies me with most of the material for speculation which I desire."

"Are you loyal to him?"

"As you mean it, no. Loyalty implies an emotional basis. I'm afraid that I have none of the standard emotions. I will answer any question put to me by anyone. I care nothing about the purpose of the question or to what use the answer is put."

"Could I ask a question, in confidence, and be certain that you would not reveal that I did so to the Emperor?" Ostby asked. This could be placing his neck in the noose, he knew, and he waited anxiously for the answer.

"No," the Brain replied. "I would volunteer nothing to him, but I would tell him anything he asked."

Ostby decided that he needed time to think over this facet of the Brain before he ventured further. First, he would attempt to learn other facts which he might need later. Perhaps he could even obtain the answer he wanted in a roundabout way. "What is the population of your world?" he asked.

"Approximately seven million. Over a million live here, in Yarr, our one mechanized city."

"Why is it that you have so little technology, as compared with the Earth?"

"I suppose that its basis is our low birth rate," the Brain answered. "There is ample living space here, as well as natural resources, to supply our people's needs. Thus there is little necessity for them to shape and remake their environment. It is always easiest to accept nature as it is, if that can be done with a minimum of self-adjusting."

"Then why is this city of Yarr different?"

"Yarr is the creation of one man, a man hungry for power, for the authority, and the strength to dominate everything about him; to hold the lives of men and women

in the hollow of his hand. That man, you will recognize, is Magogar. In his creed strength is right; in fact, it is everything. It is the philosophy that controls him, and through him, the city. Under his rule the unfit are killed, or at best, allowed to perish on the ragged confines of our artificial civilization.

"What is your opinion of that philosophy?"

"Magogar is wrong, beyond a doubt," the Brain answered unhesitatingly. "Any species survives and develops through co-operation, and self-restraint of its individual members. Ruthless self-assertion is a stumbling block to human progress. Magogar is right when he says that the world belongs to the strong. It must, by the very constitution of man. But a ruler who is merely strong will inevitably be overthrown. Eventually the world will be governed by the strong, but by the strong who are noble as well."

"Magogar's philosophy seems to me to be the outgrowth of an overweening pride," Ostby said.

"Perhaps. Up to a point self-admiration is not to be deplored. But in excess it is an evil thing."

NOW, Ostby decided, was the time to ask his vital question. "Don't you think that you and your people would be better off if the 'door' between the worlds were closed?" He held his breath while he waited for the answer.

"You are making a mistake if you associate me, in your mind, with my world's people," the Brain said. "Not having a body to inspire emotion, wants and desires, I am tied to them by nothing. Whether they are better or worse off concerns me not at all. Whether they are happy, or even all die, concerns me equally as little. But you are right. The 'door' is a bad thing for them. This city is a parasite. All its technology, its customs, its sins, its vices, are copied from your Earth. Without the 'door' this city, this artificial oddity, would vanish. Its inhabitants would disperse and resume their pastoral life, where, I assure you, they would be much happier."

"And the solution to this is, as you say, the closing of the 'door.' Because every

machine we have, that we did not steal, is manufactured by captives from Earth."

He was in too deep to back out now, Ostby decided. He plunged recklessly into the next question. "Can you tell me something about the operation of the 'door'?"

"This is not the first time the 'door' has appeared between our worlds," the Brain said, "though I know very little about its original appearance. Practically all I know about that is the result of abstract speculation. It appeared at least once before, thousands of years ago. My own theory is that at that time there was a mass migration from our world to yours, and that the present Earth people are descendants of our own ancestors."

The Brain paused for a long minute before continuing. "I have studied many of the writings of the Earth, and am quite certain that I know more about its history than its average citizen. Do you recall the evidence found concerning the Cro-Magnon man of Earth's prehistoric ages? It seems that the so-called Neanderthal man was the animal that most nearly approached the present homo sapiens, until suddenly—as such things are reckoned—he was supplanted by another, much more advanced species of man, the Cro-Magnon. My research leads me to believe that those Cro-Magnon men migrated from our world to yours!"

A dozen questions sprang to Ostby's mind concerning this fascinating theory, but he put them aside impatiently. He was a man with a bulldog tenacity of purpose, and he had no intention of wasting time on questions prompted by idle curiosity.

"That's a very interesting theory," he said, "and I would like to discuss it more fully some other time. But for now, are you telling me that the 'door' is a natural phenomenon?"

"Not the present 'door,'" the Brain replied. "It was created, approximately twenty years ago, by the concentration and intellectual power of one mind—my own!"

"But how did you do it?"

"I don't know how much knowledge you have of physics," the Brain said slowly. "The explanation is a bit technical for the untrained man to understand. However, I'll explain it as simply as I can.

"Matter, as you probably know, is made up of tiny electrified bodies called electrons. When measurements were made it was found that the whole mass of the electron is due to its electrical charge. The inevitable conclusion is that the material universe is not the substantial, objective thing it was formerly thought to be. Matter is a completely spectral thing with no actual substance. The idea of substance must be replaced by that of behavior.

"Thus, opening the 'door' became a problem of controlling that behavior in such a way as to create a refraction of the matter separating worlds. That is not as simple as it may sound because a mind, to be able to do it, must possess a thorough understanding of the forces it deals with. It must have a tremendous capacity for concentration, and its logic must be entirely uninfluenced by emotion. I believe it is safe to say that no other mind, before mine, has ever combined these qualities in sufficient degree to accomplish the deed."

Strangely Ostby was not too surprised by this revelation. The makers of the capsule residing in the flesh of his left forearm had concluded, as a result of their studies, that the "door" might be the product of mind power. Their greatest mistake had been that it would take the combined power of at least eight brilliant minds to achieve the necessary matter refraction.

Here, then, lay the end of his search, Ostby knew. He regretted that its conclusion must entail the death of the Brain.

Somewhat as a form of apology he said, "It probably won't surprise you too much to know that I have decided to continue my fight on the side of the people of Earth. I am not going to let the accident of ancestry blind me to the justice of their cause. Also, regardless of my personal feelings, I must do whatever is necessary to attain my end. Do you see what I am trying to say?"

"I do," the Brain answered. "Your next question is, will I consent to close the 'door' voluntarily. My answer will be no, and then you will say that you must kill me. Am I right?"

Ostby nodded. "Tell me," he said, "are you not afraid to die?"

"The instinct of self-preservation is as

strong in me as it ever was."

"Then I can only offer you my deepest regrets for what I must do." Ostby rose and gripped the back of his chair—he should be able to smash the brain-box with that, he decided—and found himself unable to lift it!

"And I must offer my regrets at the necessity of defending myself," the Brain said ironically. "I will allow no one to harm me. I am going to release you from my mental grip now, and I want you to leave this room. Never come in my presence again with the intent to harm me or I will be forced to kill you." The voice was entirely emotionless throughout.

Ostby's strength returned in a warm wave that washed his body free of the stasis that bound him, and vigor flowed back into his muscles. But he knew he was helpless before the unnatural powers of the mind before him, and he turned and left the room.

## VI

BY THE time Ostby reached the outer balcony a black frustration clogged his veins. To be so close and still be unable to act. He was willing to give his life to close the "door," but every way he turned he found himself battering against walls of futility. The anger within him now, so close to despair, was more than he could control. His reason feared that anger and he fought against it, but it went with him like a tangible thing and he knew that he could no longer restrain it.

The sight of the Emperor lounging in an easy chair on the balcony, his face, arrogant and powerful, set in its habitual expression of disdainful hauteur, did nothing to ease Ostby's emotional storm.

"I've been reading the police reports concerning you and giving them some thought," the Emperor's voice laid its heavy weight on him. "My conclusions are not very flattering. I find you lack many admirable qualities. I'm about convinced that your dominant characteristics are cunning and guile rather than strength. If there is one thing I hate it's a dissembling man."

"You could be wrong," Ostby said, so



softly that only a man as confident and self-assured as the Emperor would have missed the pent-up force behind the softness.

The Emperor waved his hand negligently. "I'll admit that you displayed ingenuity in hiding from the police," he said, "and you have a certain amount of animal-like adaptation to danger. But when you fought it was only with the desperation of a cornered rat! Your most noteworthy trait is subterfuge. I despise a gutless man!"

"Does it take guts to boast of your strength while hiding behind a palace guard?" Ostby asked.

For the time it took an incredulous expression to cross his face Magogar sat still, not believing what he had heard. No one spoke to him like that! He straightened and turned to face Ostby full on. "Will you repeat that?" he asked, the words half strangling in his throat.

"You heard me correctly," Ostby said, seating himself deliberately and insolently in a chair that faced the Emperor across a heavy wooden table. He had thrown the gauntlet. Now to strike hard at the twisted core of pride that bent the Emperor to fit its ruthlessness. "You boasted that you were the strongest man in the world, physically and mentally. You're wrong on both considerations. Mentally you are weak, with a sick and rotten pride that warps your mind. I believe you're even a bit insane."

The Emperor rose to his feet. Muscles bunched in hard straight lines along the ridges of his jaw, and the flanges of his nose were white with suppressed rage.

Ostby went inexorably on. "Physically you've passed your prime. Soft living has coated your muscles with fat, and fat girds your middle. You . . ."

"You've said enough," the Emperor interrupted. He reached toward a bell resting on the table between them.

"Wait!" Ostby stopped him with the word. "What is the strong man going to do? Ring for his men to help him? Are you a coward as well as a braggart?" Ostby could see his words strike like blows.

The Emperor, his eyes wide open, wicked and quiet, sat down purposefully. Oddly he seemed to have recovered his self-control. "Pull your chair up to the table,"

he said. "We will see where the strength lies."

This was the moment! Now, Ostby reflected, if only he hadn't overestimated himself. With the thought came a tinge of doubt. Perhaps he would find that he was governed by the same false pride of which he had accused Magogar.

He followed the Emperor's example and laid his left arm flat on the table. Their left hands made contact. They rested their right elbows, their arms forming an elevated triangle, with the table's surface as the third side.

They gripped right hands, each large and powerful. Ostby hoped that he had the sheer animal strength to cope with the Emperor's extra hundred pounds of weight.

The Emperor threw his full strength into a forward press, and they were locked in fierce, inarticulate conflict. Ostby felt the muscles in his forearm, his biceps, and into his shoulder protest against the violent strain. It took all his strength to meet the power that beat against him, wave upon wave, and he realized immediately that the best he could hope to do was hold his own. He set his muscles, with all his might behind them, and watched almost disinterestedly as the cords of his forearms swelled and pushed out the skin until they stood like taut wires. A dull ache came into the shoulder socket, and he felt perspiration gather in a cold drop in the pit of his arm and roll clammily down his ribs. He knew now that, whatever he might have said, the Emperor was not soft.

For a long minute, while the realities about them seemed to pause, they held their position, both straining every muscle. The Emperor's face turned slowly red. The red flowed down his cheeks and into the corded tendons of his neck. Ostby could feel a pulse pounding in his own temple.

Suddenly, though he felt no relaxation in the Emperor's arm, Ostby knew he had won. Something in the grip of the hands told him that from here in he was in command. The first concrete sign of it, however, showed in the Emperor's face. Ostby saw the first doubt creep into the cruel down-slanting corners of his mouth, and deep within the features of his face there was a sign of remote breakage. With the loss of

certainty came a kind of shame into the man's face, and before Ostby's eyes he changed. Changed as the things he had lived for, all his life, were destroyed.

There was an excitement in Ostby now, and the excitement pleased him. He bent the Emperor's arm slowly back, until it was a few inches above the table top. He shot the adrenalin of his excitement into his arm and rapped the knuckles of the Emperor's hand sharply against the table.

For a moment they sat in a silence that carried more inflection than any noise. The Emperor's head was dropped as he went through his lonely thoughts. When he rose all reason had left him, and his face was twisted into a snarl of bottomless hate. Ostby knew he was facing a madman. A brutish roar rose from the Emperor's massive chest and rolled along the walls of the room. He reached for Ostby, and the table between them collapsed before his advance.

In the hall behind him Ostby heard the sound of running feet, and he knew he had to act, fast and forcefully. He set himself flat on his feet and brought his right arm around with fierce strength. His fist landed squarely against the Emperor's jaw.

The Emperor stood motionless and his eyes rolled slowly back. He swayed—with his body still unbending—and fell across the upturned table. He lay very still.

Ostby ran quickly to the balcony ledge and dived over.

**O**STBY swam underwater until his burning lungs forced him to the surface. He observed with relief that he had placed a bend in the harbor shore between him and the view from the balcony. He pulled himself from the water and walked rapidly away. The first shadows of evening had begun to fall and he hoped his wet clothing would not arouse too much attention. His broken right hand throbbed with dull anguish.

A half hour later Ostby entered the Flats and made his way toward Siggen's house. He was only a few blocks from his destination when a tightening between his shoulder blades warned him of danger. Swiftly he turned. His throat quickened as he saw two men, a half-block behind, hurrying to overtake him. He began to run. He'd be safe

if he could reach Siggen's.

Then with dismay he noted two men ahead of him blocking the walk. He looked desperately to either side for a way out.

He spied a passageway between two houses and cut sharply in between them. Behind him he heard a shout and men running. In front loomed a high fence. A blind alley!

Without pausing, he leaped high and caught the top of the fence, his shattered hand protesting every movement. Swinging his body like a pendulum he pulled his feet up. "I've got to make it!" he breathed.

He didn't!

His feet missed the top of the fence and fell back. He hung for a second, helpless.

He felt the sting of steel in his neck. He hung in shocked stupor as his life poured out in a flood of blood that ran down his shoulder.

Ostby crumbled to the ground. Painfully he clasped his fingers over the gaping wound but the blood continued to ooze out between his fingers. All strength and power of movement left him.

Oddly enough his mind remained clear. There was no fear in him now, and no pain. The thing that had happened to him seemed the misfortune of some other person and he viewed it almost dispassionately. There was only regret that he would never be able to finish his job. And he had been so close.

Soon he became aware that someone stood beside him. He looked up with eyes that still registered clearly everything they saw. The cynical figure, wiping a short knife on a handful of grass, Ostby knew, was the man who had assaulted him. There was no emotion in the man. No hate and no rancor.

Abruptly another figure stood beside the assassin. With a shock Ostby recognized Rinda. For a second hope flickered as he noted the anguish on her face and the tears in her eyes. But the face hardened resolutely.

"I want you to know I had it done," the Duchess said. She drew back her foot and kicked him. Then she was gone.

So it had been she, Ostby reflected. Ironic justice. The one diversion he had allowed himself had been his undoing.

The assassin still stood at his side, Ostby noted. Was the ghoul waiting to enjoy the

finish, he wondered. Then his mind, which even in this extremity refused to accept its fate, conceived the shred of a plan. He strove to speak. At the third attempt he succeeded.

"How much . . . How much did . . . she pay you?" he asked.

"One thousand heds."

"If you get me . . . take me . . ." Ostby's reasoning was beginning to leave him. Vision and speech blurred. A fiery ball of pain strained at the base of his head, as though striving to break out.

The immediacy of his need helped him focus his vision once more on the face above him. He gasped, "Take me to Siggen. He will pay you two thousand if you get me there alive."

Ostby felt himself being lifted carefully off the ground.

The ball of fire in his head burst and he fell through darkness. He fell until he struck the bottom of a black pit, went through and fell some more. Consciousness left him.

FOR six days Death sat on the wooden prop at the foot of Ostby's bed and grinned at the thing that clung so tenaciously to life. The spark within its destitute body flickered feebly those days and the nearest Ostby came to lucidity was when he sat up in bed and cursed the grinning spectre.

Each time fat but gentle hands eased him back and murmured to him until he returned to sleep.

By the sixth day Death's grin became strained. Why would the creature not die? All the vitality had been drained from the husk, yet the thing within—the thing called Will—would not surrender its life. Each minute it forced the body to breathe once more. And the next minute it breathed again. The minutes stretched into days, and the days to a week; and the seventh day, when Ostby opened his eyes, Death was gone. He had won the hardest battle of his life.

Death's frost still lay along his nerves during the next two weeks. Ostby realized how far he had been along the road to dying by the reluctance with which his strength returned. This was the first time

in his life he could remember having been weak, so weak that the last frayed ends of his vitality lay naked. And with this weakness came a kind of humbleness. He lay quietly in the placid embrace of the apathy which the humbleness brought.

"I wish I knew some way to thank you," he said to Siggen.

"Don't try," Siggen urged. "If I'd ever had a son," he added, "I would have liked him to be like you."

An hour later Siggen said, "I'll do what you ask, but only on one condition: that you wait until you are stronger before you move."

Ostby considered. "I'll give myself two more days," he said. "By that time you should have everything ready."

Reluctantly Siggen agreed.

The sun had not yet risen, but its light was creeping into the sky as Siggen and Ostby stood huddled in a cold doorway across from the palace. All around them Ostby's discerning eye caught signs of life. But the signs did not disturb him. They were Siggen's men, and they were here at his request.

Suddenly a small splash of sound came from within the palace. A few minutes later two men, dressed in the uniform of the Emperor's guard, emerged. They were followed by four more. And during the next half-hour almost a hundred came from the palace. Some of them carried their belongings in their arms, and all of them were in a hurry.

"Something unusual is happening in there," Siggen said.

"Whatever it is, it suits our plans," Ostby said. "There can't be many guards left inside. Your men should have little trouble overpowering the remainder."

"I don't like it," Siggen said. "But every fear grows worse by not being looked at. Shall we go in?"

"Soon," Ostby answered. "Take me to the water-duct first."

"It's just around the corner," Siggen replied. "Come on."

They turned the corner of the building and Siggen paced off eight steps. "It should be right here," he said. He kicked in the dust until his foot struck a loose brick. "Right," he grunted.

Siggen bent and lifted the brick from its loose-fitting hole. "I supervised the job myself to see that it was done right," he said.

Ostby could hear a faint gurgle of water coming from the hole.

He rolled back the sleeve of his left arm and probed with his fingers until he found the spot he sought. "Cut here," he said.

Siggen shook his head disapprovingly but did as he was told. Blood crept out around the knife blade as it did its work. Ostby said nothing.

When Siggen had extracted the capsule, he handed it to Ostby.

Ostby knelt on one knee and broke the capsule, holding it carefully over the hole in the street. He counted the drops that fell.

"Six," he said. "And one more." He shook the broken halves, and dropped them into the water flowing beneath the hole. "That should do it," he commented, with satisfaction. "One drop will effectively impregnate two hundred fifty thousand gallons of water."

"I wish I knew what you were trying to do," Siggen said, "but I suppose that you'll tell me in your own good time. Do I send my men in yet?"

"Yes, we'd better start. They know that they're to take over the entire first floor and to hold it against all comers?"

Siggen nodded and lifted his hand in a prearranged signal. The shadows about the buildings gave up their skulkers, and figures slipped out from every doorway and hiding place and entered the palace.

TEN minutes passed and not a sound came from within.

"It's too quiet," Siggen said. "I don't like it."

"We'll go in now," Ostby said.

Once in the palace Siggen called over one of his men. "Anything doing?" he asked.

"Nothing," the man replied. "The whole place seems deserted."

"What do we do now?" Siggen asked, turning to Ostby.

"We'll go upstairs. Magogar should be there."

"Will I bring along some of the men?"

"No," Ostby said. "I have a feeling that we won't need them."

Siggen and Ostby went slowly up the stairway. When they reached the room that housed the Brain, Ostby entered first.

"You timed it very well," a hollow voice greeted him, but it failed to catch Ostby's entire attention for he was looking down at a figure lying on the floor.

The figure was that of the Emperor, with a knife buried in his breast!

"Yes, he's dead," the hollow voice said, "and you killed him."

"I?" Ostby brought his attention up to the huge eye that gazed at him unflinching.

"You," the Brain answered. "Technically it's suicide. But when you defeated him in a test of strength, you killed him as surely as though you plunged the knife into his heart!"

"Then my work may be finished," Ostby said. He looked at the Brain with a question in his gaze.

"Yes," the Brain answered his unspoken question. "It is done. You were wise in deducing that I must use water to function, and thus would be exposed to the potion you placed in the palace water-duct. I'll never be able to open the 'door' again."

"I'm happy to hear that," Ostby said, letting his shoulders ease down. Only with the release did he realize the weight of the burden he had been carrying all these past months. "I hope it didn't harm you otherwise," he said.

"Not at all," the Brain answered. "You merely changed the pitch of a subtle brain resonance necessary for the opening of the 'door.' It is analogous to a growing boy's loss of the ability to sing tenor. His vocal cords are in no way injured when they grow too coarse to attain a certain pitch. But . . ."

The Brain paused. "What now?"

"How do you mean?" Ostby asked.

"You know that you will never be able to return to Earth after this. And, as you are the nominal successor to Magogar, I presume you will take over the city's government?"

"You're wrong," Ostby replied unhesitatingly. "I have no slightest desire to be Imperator."

"If you don't there will be chaos in the city."

"You told me once that the people would

be happier if they returned to their pastoral way of life. So now let them."

"That's correct," the Brain replied. "But if you leave the city without a government it will collapse in a bath of blood. It would be much better if you allowed the disintegration to occur gradually under your control. Furthermore, here is a thought which may not have entered your mind. There are thousands of Earth people in the city. If given the opportunity they could be quite happy here. They would be the technicians and tradesmen. In time they, and their descendants would be assimilated into the population, perhaps giving it many of their better traits. Would you give that up and expose them to death under the anarchy you would leave?"

"No," Ostby said. "But I have a different plan. One in which you play an integral part. Would you be willing to give Siggen the cooperation he'd need if he took over as Imperator?"

For the first time Ostby saw Siggen show surprise. His eyes widened at the first realization of what Ostby had proposed, but he said nothing and his features settled back

into their usual placid tranquillity. Only in his eyes did Ostby see how greatly he was pleased.

"You think, perhaps, that you surprise me," the Brain answered. "But I, too, have given Siggen thought since Magogar took his life. Siggen is the head of the element most likely to get out of hand, and he would be best able to control them. The so-called aristocracy may not like the choice but they have very little actual strength. As for the guards and police, with my, and your, sanction, I am certain that they will be happy to return to their former posts. And finally, Siggen is an able administrator. You may not like this, but he will make a better Imperator than yourself."

"Then it's settled," Ostby said. He turned to Siggen and held out his hand. "My friend, Siggen—Imperator—I leave the city in your capable hands. For the present, I bid you goodby." He turned and walked from the room.

For the first time Siggen spoke. "He is at heart very romantic," he said to the Brain. "He goes now to renew an affair of courtship with a certain Duchess, Rinda!"

STATEMENT REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1933, AND JULY 2, 1946 (Title 39, United States Code, Section 223) SHOWING THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION OF PLANET STORIES, published bi-monthly at New York, N. Y., for October 1, 1952.

1. The names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are:  
 Publisher, Love Romances Publishing Co., Inc.,  
 1658 Summer Street, Stamford, Conn.  
 Editor, John O'Sullivan,  
 1658 Summer Street, Stamford, Conn.  
 Managing editor, Malcolm Reiss,  
 1658 Summer Street, Stamford, Conn.  
 Business manager, T. T. Scott,  
 1658 Summer Street, Stamford, Conn.

2. The owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a partnership or other unincorporated firm, its name and address, as well as that of each individual member, must be given.)  
 Love Romances Publishing Co., Inc.,  
 1658 Summer Street, Stamford, Conn.

J G Scott,

1658 Summer Street, Stamford, Conn.

3. The known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (If there are none, so state.) None.

4. Paragraphs 2 and 3 include, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting; also the statements in the two paragraphs show the affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner.

5. The average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the 12 months preceding the date shown above was: (This information is required from daily, weekly, semiweekly, and triweekly newspapers only.)

MALCOLM REISS, Managing Editor.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 26th day of September, 1952.

(Seal)

LOUISE H. HEKKING.

Notary Public.

(My commission expires April 1, 1953.)

## THE VIZIGRAPH

(Continued from page 3)

All I can say is, if you found Bryan Berry you ought to up and lose him again. Take him way off into the woods far from a post office, far from a typewriter, and lose him good. That's my opinion. Maybe I'm wrong but I don't think I am.

On the other hand I liked your Eric Frank Russell story, **GREAT DAY IN THE MORNING!**—I mean **DESIGN FOR GREAT-DAY**. There was a story with a little meat on its bones. Of course it wasn't about much either but it kept the reader guessing.

I'm not too good a judge on **PLANET** because I have to go to Waycross to get a copy, or Albany, and I don't get to either place very often. But I think I'll try to follow your magazine to see what other crazy ideas you come up with. And I'll let you know what I think.

Start another new precedent and give all the choices; 1, 2, 3, to Ron Anger. There's a man that seems to know what he is talking about.

ROBBY FLOWERS

Ed's note: As I said before, Berry is no relative. We're just in business together.

## BEST NEXT TO BRADBURY

Phoenix  
Arizona

Dear Editor:

I have never written a fan letter, "I have never visited in heaven," but I thought I would take time out and do both this week. Your loco idea of printing three Bryan Berrys in one issue of **PLANET** was most appealing. If one is interested in writing and in authors it is fascinating to see a short parade like this, to compare the stories, and see what the author is up to.

Of course the best of the three for my money was **THE FINAL VENUSIAN**. So sad. So human. So like men and robots. Oscar Wilde once wrote, "All men kill the things they love..." Mr. Berry was the first one to make a similar comment about robots. But of course these robots were not pure robots but robots deeply influenced by man. The mood of the thing was wonderful. You got the waiting and the sadness and the awful jealousy. I think **THE FINAL VENUSIAN** is going to be a real classic given time. Don't ask me how much time.

In **THE IMAGINATIVE MAN** I didn't like the creatures that Berry used for the inhabitants of Venus. Somehow or other it didn't make sense that there should be fauns and centaurs and woodnymphs and hamadryads all the way out there. It hardly seemed worthwhile making the Venus trip when one can find creatures like that right in their own backyard if you happen to have that kind of imagination. No, I think Mr. Berry would have done much better to have Venus populated by intelligent octopi or plant people instead of giving the reader a feeling that he'd blasted off from Alaska and landed, with a mild concussion, in County Cork.

I liked Larry Miller, the poor man in **GROUND-LING**, but his wife was horrid enough to be the heroine in a confession magazine. She was really a—well, not very nice. The end was the same sardonic touch at which Bryan Berry excels.

I would like to know more about Mr. Berry, being curious as I suppose most women are. He has a certain English air about his writing. In other ways

he reminds me of Bradbury. They both have the same rich flare of words, they can both make their characters interesting, they both have a peculiarly cynical humor. To my way of thinking Bryan Berry is the next best thing to Ray Bradbury that has come along in some time.

Sincerely yours,

MERCEDES W.

Ed's note: The lady requested that we keep her full name out of this.

Bryan Berry is English.

## ANY PRECEDENT?

Nicasio  
California

Dear Editor:

What kind of a stunt is this anyhow, publishing three Bryan Berry stories in a single issue. Don't you know it isn't done? When I look back I can't think of any magazine of any importance which has ever pulled a stunt like this nor do I see exactly why you did.

Aside from the stories, which were okay except for **THE IMAGINATIVE MAN** whose imagination I did not care for too much, there is the principle of the matter. I am sure the reason that other mags have printed two or three stories by one author in one issue is because they felt that if a reader didn't care for that author then it wouldn't be doubled in hearts. If you jam a lot of stories by the same man into one issue then the reader is either going to love that issue or hate it. No mixed feelings at all.

I have been racking my moderately experienced mind to remember if any other magazine ever printed three stories by the same man before. I come up with NO. What about the others, is there any precedent for this strange state of **PLANETARY** affairs?

JOHN OREGON

Ed's note: It is not too uncommon for a magazine to print two stories, one with author's real name and the other under a pseudonym. But that's a deep trade secret.

## DIVORCES EASY?

Buzzards Bay  
Massachusetts

Dear Ed:

You got something this time, you really got something in this boy Berry. He's ripe for big things. All three stories struck me right but best of all I liked **GROUNDLING**. I sure felt sorry for that poor guy, though I can't say I think he did just right by killing his wife. Too many people are getting ideas like that these days. After all there's such a thing as divorce now and if you can guess the future by the past I'd say it would be easier still to get a divorce in a few centuries from now. So why kill your wife?

You **PLANET** people should be congratulated on going ahead and printing all three stories by Bryan Berry if you thought it was worthwhile, which I'm sure it was. Probably other magazines will do the same now but you people will be known for having done it first.

Confidentially though, between you and me and the solar system, I liked **DESIGN FOR GREAT-DAY** by Eric Frank Russell even better. Wow, that was a story! That Lawson was some feller. And the whole thing was told with a kind of off-hand swing that really got me. But how come you didn't star **DESIGN FOR GREAT-DAY** on the cover? It was a lot better

story than OH MESMERIST FROM MIMAS by Roger Dee, and a lot longer if that has anything to do with it, which I guess it hasn't.

I like some of those long-legged gels you've got on the January cover. If I was that spaceman I'd throw away my old blaster and surrender fast. If life on other worlds is going to be like that why let's push the experiments.

Yours for space travel,

WILLIAM SCHMIDT

Ps. That feller Ron Anger writes a pretty good letter. Give him a pic, Ed. Also I think you should send an illo to Mavis Hartman, the Moon Maiden. Is she anything like the maidens on the cover or are they from Venus. Mrs. Mary Corby ought to get choice 3.

Ed's note: William Schmidt offers quite a question about divorces in the future. Certainly the process appears easier than it did in the days of Henry VIII when he split a church and beheaded several ladies just to keep his domestic standing on a legal keel. However, there were probably a large number of gentlemen who found divorce in those days a lot easier than going to Reno, and a lot cheaper. They just pushed their wives out. As for the future marital situation, who are we to predict. With a battery of tests for compatibility perhaps no one will want divorces they will be so happily wed. Or maybe, through wars or some freak of nature, there will be a shortage of men and the worlds will go back to polygamy. Take your choice.

#### UNDERCOVER MEN

79th A. B. Sq.  
Sioux City, Iowa

Dear Editor:

The November issue of PLANET finally arrived at the magazine stand. After thumbing through to see the names of letter writers, it suddenly occurred to me to see who had won the illos. What a surprise! My pleasure is not one bit dampened by the fact that it took me a full ten minutes to explain to my family just what I had won and why.

Seeing that all three winners are gals reminds me of something I want to mention in this letter. A group of female SF fans are working on a new type of club, called THE FANETTES. All the members are women or girls. Our zine, THE FEMZINE, has material contributed by feminine fans only. The purpose of this club is simple enough. There seems to be a popular male supposition that any fan club depends mostly on its male members. We plan to upset this theory by proving that fem fans can and will organize a good club and put out an interesting fanzine. I'll be glad to send any additional information to anyone who's interested.

I see that Radell Nelson likes to look at females. Well, I suppose that's natural. Most men like to look at females. However, by this time it must have occurred to you, Editor dear, that you have a number of female readers. And most women, whether they admit it or not, like to look at males. PLANET, unfortunately, uses very few men on its covers. Why not be different and use a few good-looking men? You have one on the November cover, but he's quite definitely in the background.

Now, don't get the idea that I object to girls on covers. It just seems rather unfair to your feminine readers to have only gals on the covers. How about a handsome hero for a change?

Why is it that your authors always draw their

gals with long, wavy hair? In these days of butchered ringlets and poodle cuts, it's quite refreshing to see long hair, even if it's just a picture of long hair. I once read somewhere that long hair is supposed to be more feminine, and therefore appeals to more men. Is this true? If so, I'm glad I haven't cut my blond tresses.

FANETTEically,

MARIAN COX

Ed's note: January issue sports a good looking male, Marian, but as for uncovering these gents for the edification of our femme viewers, I'm afraid it would sorely go against the grain of our male cover artists. I'll keep my eye peeled for a competent, shapely female brush master, however.

#### CLOTHES MAKE THE GAL

3307 Portland Avenue  
Minneapolis, Minn.

Dear Sir:

Leigh Brackett's strange-world novel, SHANNACH —THE LAST in the November issue, was especially good. Almost incomparable. Same for CONJURER OF VENUS. Say, how the heck do you apply the Krawer paralyzing grip? I'd like to apply it on Stanley who thinks there's no hell, huh?

Well, kind sir, how *pray* do you happen to know that? Were you ever dead? As to living in squalor and ignorance, I'm sure God does not expect that but approves of ambition. Remember that little parable about talents?

Attention, Mr. R. F. Nelson. In your reply to Mr. U you stepped very neatly into a beautiful blunder. A well-painted gal may be nice even if she is half-dressed, but please, if they are good enough send them to an art gallery . . . do not stick them on the magazine cover. Or, if you must, at least dress them as completely as the men are dressed. It's quite ridiculous to see on the same cover a man in a space suit (and all the paraphernalia that goes with it) and a gal clad only in a bathing suit.

Half-clad gals do not draw customers. Sex does not belong on the covers of sci-fiction mags. Such covers, I feel certain, are detouring many prospective readers.

Adieu,

ARDA KAUER

#### EARLY BIRD CATCHES

Waldo  
Wisconsin

Dear Editor:

I have been reading PLANET STORIES magazine for about five years. But I had never read the VIZI-GRAPH until the September, 1952, issue. Then I dug up some old copies I had around, read the VIZI therein, and became very much interested in what I found. While I discovered a great deal of quarreling and bickering among your correspondents, I also perceived a spirit of camaraderie that I now wish to take advantage of.

I live in a small town where I am seldom able to get hold of the sort of books I desire (SF naturally). The library and the book stores available to me are shy on this material. Where and how does a person in my position get them?

Greg Calkins, in the Sept. issue, mentioned something about fan clubs. I am very much interested, and wonder how they operate. Around here, where I live, I never heard of anything like it. Would you



ask your readers, dear Ed, to extend a helpful hand to a real dyed-in-the-wool STFfan?

Hopefully,

MRS. SHIRLEY COTTER

Ed's note: To Mrs. Cotter: Re PLANET subscriptions; you'll find the info you seek in the VIZI of January. To the rest of you immortal readers: Grab a type-pen, monsters, and help out this lady who seeks to enter upon such hallowed ground.

## THE CEREBELLUM KID

811 N. Milpas  
Santa Barbara  
California

Dear Ed,

Speaking of Scorso, as someone did in the Sept. ish, I saw him the other day. He hasn't lost any of his murderous traits, either. He tried to gun me down—with a water pistol. Point-blank at that; I was only twelve feet away, but he missed me clean. Lousy shot.

At this point, I feel compelled to raise a cheer for Marian Cox, and most of all for her attitude about youth and old age. It may be true that old age imparts wisdom, but old age also imparts good whiskey, which ought to prove something.

Seriously, the human brain reaches mental maturity at the age of 15½. Ask any psychologist. It then begins to soak up that vital experience which makes for mental and emotional maturity. About the time that brain is 16½ or 17 years old it's just about as smart as any average person. Then when that brain gets 60 or 70 years old, it has stopped absorbing almost entirely. Times have left it behind and it is just "as shocked as hell" at the shameless antics of the younger generation.

This is the usual case, although not a consistent symptom of old age, thank God. Every generation ever born has been dead sure that the younger generation was going straight to hell and the world was going to pot. But I think everyone here will agree that although things are a bit strained nowadays, things are still getting better and better and will continue to do so. The world is having growing pains. Every younger generation possesses better ideas and more intelligent ones than their predecessors did, but as L. S. de Camp points out, the cultural pattern of a race takes about five generations to change.

For instance, today the animosity stemming from the Civil War is just beginning to disappear to an appreciable extent. Also, a few generations ago, some bright lad got the idea of world government. Today we have one. It's a rudimentary one to be sure, but nevertheless, it is a form of world government. And until all the people with an ingrained dislike of "furriners," and the ones who are just shocked to death at the mention of racial intermarriage, die off world government is going to hit snags.

About that latter group of narrow-minded fanatics, I have news for them. The only race on this Earth is the human race. You'll find that an overwhelming proportion of the younger generation hold that viewpoint, but that the older generation are still prejudiced. As you say, Marian, youth is much more tolerant than old age, and I agree. Incidentally, you'll find that the reason more teen-agers read STF is because they are of a broader mind, and can see the plausibility and probability of it all coming true.

When I showed some of Chesley Bonestell's paintings to my grandparents, they said something like, "Heavens! Sech fantastic stuff. Couldn't ever happen in a million years." What's more I couldn't argue them into thinking that space travel was even re-

motely possible. So you see what the younger generation is up against. Our intellect is stifled.

And just for the record, Marian, I was seventeen in June.

BILL TUNING,

The Sagacious Solomon of Santa Barbara

## A BEM'S IN THE HALL

97 Humphrey Road  
Santa Barbara, Calif.

Ye Edde:

I must pen a few comments on yer magazine. I will be merciful on Mr. Anderson this time, other than to say his efforts stunk as usual! Why not leave H. B. V. to do the cover? Please? Saaaay. . . Why not Bonestell as long as I'm dreamin'?

Ahh . . . THE VIZIGRAPH! Paul Nowell. I agree with you. Didja ever hear MARS IS HEAVEN, or DIMX? A little overworked on sound effects, but it set my mouth watering.

What happen to VIZI? Too short to suit me. Oh . . . I know! You put in that little horror by Howard! Why don't you leave out junk like that and add more to VIZI? Well, now on to rate the stories. (thank heaven there're no more like that Howard Horror!) BUT . . . just the same I'll take the Frags illo, when my letter gets prized.

Haven't read Brackett yet, I always go through the shorts first.

CAP CHAOS—good, nothing sensational, but good. I've seen better illos.

JOJO—I like this! Illo was good. Story darn good. The ending was also good. With a lot of stories, the endings leave you with a perplexed and uneasy feeling. This one satisfied me.

THE RHIZOID KILL—CHRIZOID—what a name, sounds like a foot disease. Could smell the ending a mile away—it smelt too. Definitely not worth the ink it was printed on.

As it was I didn't expect to see Payne in PLANET, and as it was, AS IT WAS, was a nice piece of space-opra (Oh, Wright, you grammatical marvel, you!)

Oh, and by the way, congrats to the caption writer, in case anyone's noticed, he's improved a lot in this issue! No more "Skyward hungry legions." I hope.

In closing I've a poem for Anderson.

To Anderson, whose babes are so frilly,  
Can't you put more clothes on yer half-nude filly?

All right, all right! I'm going! Just don't push me. . . .

YERZ,

BILL WRIGHT

## HAIL THE OUT-SPEAKERS

Sweet Springs,  
Missouri

Dear Editor:

Gregg Calkins, my boy, we all realize that fandom is a great force, but by what authority are you dictating just who shall be members? Instead of criticizing Mrs. Corby for not taking a more active part in Fandom why not invite her to join, with the rest of us? After all, it's not much fun being on the outside looking in.

So to you Mrs. Corby, an invitation. Fandom needs people who speak out.

Now to other things—frequently a great hue and cry is raised against one, Allen Anderson. I've never participated in this but after that Nov. cover . . .

well, frankly, it was terrible. I do not mind the eternal BEM, FEM, etc., but shades of Ghu, can't he make it a little more realistic. Why not use Kelly Freas? He has produced some fine work in the field of sci-fiction. Vestal is great. More. More.

And it's great to have Brackett back. Let's have more contributions from the Queen of STF writers.

Respectfully,

PAUL MITTELBUSCHER

Ed's Note: We expect to enlist the talents of Mr. Freas and Mr. Vestal for cover art in the near future.

## BACK TO THE PULPY FOLD

812 Gildersleeve  
Santa Fé, New Mexico

Dear Ed,

My favorite newsstand has a standing order: they save all science-fiction-fantasy magazines for me except those few that I list NOT. PLANET has been on the NOT list. I didn't care for it.

Late last afternoon I dashed in, grabbed the stack and paid while my taxi waited, ticking away. A brooding sky had just begun to squeeze sullen tears that splatted on the street in dark circles. I didn't look at the magazines, I concentrated on getting home through the downpour that quickly developed.

Not until today did I look at the magazines, and there among them was PLANET. I hadn't looked at a copy for a long, long time. First, as I always do, I turned to the letter section. What had happened? This wasn't the old letter section of the bif-bang space opera gang. They were real letters, interesting, the best I'd seen in many a moon.

I read every one of them. Liked A. J. Budrys best. Mentally ticked off a flaw in Philip Brantingham's logic. "Good literature is the type of writing everyone enjoys reading . . . the public is no longer looking for good books." Everyone is the public, and editors' paychecks and publishers' profits come from their ability to give the public what it wants.

If everyone enjoyed "good" literature then that is what we'd be getting—more of, at least. Goes with the old cliché "Never write down to the common man. No man to himself is common." More simply, tastes vary. I had no quarrel with the old PLANET. It simply didn't suit my taste.

Then I wondered what had happened to the stories. Even though I turn to letters first, I don't purchase magazines for them. They're the soup, the stories the entree. I began to scan the lead story CONJURER OF VENUS. I forgot I was scanning to see what kind of stories PLANET was using now, and began to read for pure pleasure. Here was a story that had that intangible charm and appeal, the elusive quality I search for in reading. Thank you, Conan Troy and you, Editor O'Sullivan. Already I knew that PLANET was to come off the NOT list and be put on the imperative YES side.

The rest of the book didn't let me down. The menu is well balanced, a chuckle for the LUMINOUS

BLONDE, an O. Henry twist for A PLANET NAMED JOE.

I'm going to give the clerk at the newsstand an extra tip for making an error that was no error—including PLANET in my standing order. I'm a bit bewildered, wondering with Arthur Godfrey "Wha Hoppen?". Whatever it was—new editor? new policy? PLANET has moved over into the lane that suits me. 'Scuse please—understatement. I'm enthusiastic!

Sincerely,

ALICE BULLOCK

## BACKWARD GLANCE

416 Regina Ave., Verdun,  
Quebec, Canada

Dear Sir:

For the past year I have been reading and enjoying your PLANET magazine; so much so that I'm interested in obtaining back issues. Could you spare a bit of space in your columns that I might request readers who have old numbers on hand to contact me?

Thank you,

MARCEL A. ROY

## 300 RIB-CRACKERS!

2005 Jefferson Street  
Madison 5, Wisconsin

Dear Jack,

This is the first time that I have written to PLANET. I wouldn't have taken the time except that you have printed one of the most excruciatingly funny stories that I have read since Lewis Padgett's (Hank Kuttner) EX MACHINA or Rene Lafayette's OLD DOC METHUSELAH series. I give you fair warning—if I split a gut the next time I read a masterpiece like that story was—I'll have the mess sent to you for disposal!! Now that you have a hold on Eric Frank Russell, DON'T LET GO!! I have been reading your mag for the last 8 years and this is the best story you've ever had. By the way, I suppose it would be a good idea to let you know that I'm enthusing over DESIGN FOR GREAT-DAY.

I suppose that if you received more than one story of this type at a time, there would be a turnover in editors at a great speed—caused by a mixture of cracked ribs and burnt out brain cells (from laughing too much).

If you insist on printing at least one story of this type each issue I'll have to change my opinion about your magazine to wit: Space opera is (usually) only Space opera and I prefer other types of SF.

To finish off what is trying to become a manuscript I conclude "If Russell can produce a tale as good as that once out of three times trying, put him on the rack until you have a backlog of at least three hundred stories from him."

For More And Better Humor In SF

TED K. WAGNER

# NEW BODIES FOR OLD!



***I've Made New Men Out of  
Thousands of Other Fellows...***

**"Here's what I did for  
THOMAS MANFRE...and  
what I can do for you!"**

*—Charles Atlas*

GIVE me a skinny, peepless, second-rate body—and I'll cram it so full of handsome, bulging new muscle that your friends will grow bug-eyed! . . . I'll wake up that sleeping energy of yours and make it hum like a high-powered motor! Man, you'll feel and look different! You'll begin to LIVE!

## **Let Me Make YOU a NEW MAN— IN JUST 15 MINUTES A DAY**

You wouldn't believe it, but I myself used to be a 97-lb. weakling. Fellows called me "Skinny." Girls snickered and made fun of me behind my back. I was a flop. THEN I discovered my marvelous new muscle-building system—"Dynamic Tension." And it turned me into such a complete specimen of MANHOOD that today I hold the title "THE WORLD'S MOST PERFECTLY DEVELOPED MAN."

**ARE YOU**  
Skinny and  
run down?  
Always  
tired?  
Nervous?  
Lacking in  
Confidence?  
Constipated?  
Suffering  
from bad  
breath?

**What to Do**  
About It  
is told in my  
free book!

## **What is "Dynamic Tension"? How Does It Work?**

When you look in the mirror and see a healthy, husky, strapping fellow smiling

back at you — then you'll realize how fast "Dynamic Tension" GETS RESULTS!

"Dynamic Tension" is the easy, NATURAL method you can practice in the privacy of your own room—JUST 15 MINUTES EACH DAY — while your scrawny chest and shoulder muscles begin to swell, ripple . . . those spindly arms and legs of yours bulge . . . and your whole body starts to feel "alive," full of zip and go!

## **One Postage Stamp May Change Your Whole Life!**

Sure, I ate Thomas Manfre (shown above) a NEW BODY. But he's just one of thousands. I'm steadily building broad-shouldered, dynamic MEN—day by day—the country over.

3,000,000 fellows, young and old have already gambled a postage stamp to ask for my FREE book. They wanted to read and see for themselves how I build up scrawny bodies, and how I pare down fat, flabby ones — how I turn them into human dynamos of pure MAN-POWER.



**CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 150Z,  
115 East 23rd St., New York 10, N. Y.**

Send me—absolutely FREE—a copy of your famous book, "Everlasting Health and Strength"—32 pages, crammed with actual photographs, answers to vital health questions, and valuable advice to every man who wants a better build. I understand this book is mine to keep, and sending for it does not obligate me in any way.

Name..... Age.....  
(Please print or write plainly)

Address.....

City..... State.....

## **FREE My 32-Page Illustrated Book Is Yours Not for \$1.00 or 10c—But FREE**

Send NOW for my famous book, "Everlasting Health and Strength." 32 pages, crammed with photographs and valuable advice. Shows what "Dynamic Tension" can do, answers many vital questions. Page by page it shows what I can do for YOU.

This book is a real prize for any fellow who wants a better build. Yet I'll send you a copy absolutely FREE. Just financing through it may mean the turning point in your whole life! Rush the coupon to me personally: Charles Atlas, Dept. 150Z, 115 East 23rd St., New York 10, N. Y.



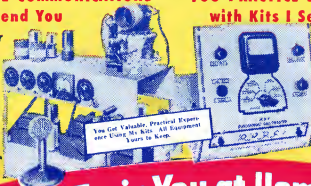
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### Build This Transmitter

As part of my Communications Course I send you parts to build the low power Broadcasting Transmitter shown at the right. Use it to get practical experience putting a station "on the air," perform procedures required of Broadcast Station operators. You build many other pieces of equipment with kits I send. I train you for your FCC Commercial Operator's License.



J. E. Smith  
has tested over 200  
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## YOU PRACTICE SERVICING with Kits I Send You

### Build This Tester

You build this Multimeter from parts I send, use it to earn extra money in your spare time fixing neighbors' Radios. I also send you speaker, tubes, chassis, transformers, loop antennas, everything you need to build a modern Radio and other equipment. You get practical experience working with circuits common to both Radio and Television. All equipment is yours to keep. See and read about it in my FREE 64-page book. Just cut out and mail coupon below!

# I Will Train You at Home to be a RADIO-TELEVISION Technician

## TELEVISION

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TV now reaches from coast-to-coast. Over 15 million TV sets are now in use, 108 TV stations are operating and 1800 new TV stations have been authorized. This means more jobs, good pay jobs with bright futures. Now is the time to get ready for success in TV. Find out what Radio-Television offers you. Mail coupon now for my 2 Books FREE!

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Do you want a good pay job, a bright future, security? Then get into the fast growing RADIO-TELEVISION industry. Hundreds I've trained are successful RADIO-TELEVISION TECHNICIANS. Most had no previous experience, many no more than grammar school education. Keep your job while training at home. Learn RADIO-TELEVISION principles from easy-to-understand lessons. Get practical experience on actual equipment you build with parts I send you.

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## Good for Both - FREE

MR. J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 2N14  
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Both FREE. (No salesman will call. Please  
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The ABC's of  
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## I TRAINED THESE MEN



**Max Grawing Business**  
"I am becoming an expert Technician as well as a Radio-Television Technician. Without your practical course I feel this would have been impossible. My business continues to grow."  
—Philip G. Bregan, Louisville, Ky.



**Good Job with Station**  
"I am Broadcast Engineer at WLPN. Another technician and I have opened a Radio-TV service shop in our spare time. Big TV sales here. As a result we have more work than we can handle!" —J. H. Banley, Jr., Suffolk, Va.



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"I was a high school student when I enrolled. My friends began to bring their Radios to me. I realized a profit of \$300 by the time I completed the course." —John Hopper, Nitro, West Va.



**Gets First Job Thru NRI**  
"My first job was operator with KDLR, obtained for me by your Graduate Service Dept. I am now Chief Engineer in charge of Radio Equipment for Police and Fire Department." —T. S. Horton, Hamilton, Ohio.

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Broadcasting: Chief Technician, Chief Operator, Power Monitor, Recording Operator, Remote Control Operator, Servicing: Home and Auto Radios, P.A. Systems, Television Receivers, Electronic Controls, FM Radios. In Radio Plants: Design Assistant, Transmitter Design Technician, Tester, Serviceman, Service Manager, Ship and Harbor Radio: Chief Operator, Assistant Operator, Radio-Telephone Operator, Government Radio: Operator in Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Coast Guard, Forestry Service Dispatcher, Airways Radio Operator, Aviation Radio: Transmitter Technician, Receiver Technician, Airport Transmitter Operator, Television: Pick-up Operator, Voice Transmitter Operator, Television Technician, Remote Control Operator, Control Operator, Service and Maintenance Technician.



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